



Fiction

Group

The Journey Towards the Magic Within

Queen Elizabeth School Old Students' Association Secondary School, Lee, Sze Yuen Mars – 13

The walls were freshly painted and the windows were so shiny that you could see your reflection in them. Inside the building, the school bell rang and the students began descending the stairs into the canteen. Except for one extraordinary kid who stayed in the quiet classroom, all alone. He was examining a piece of paper, writings scribbled all over it. The silence was broken when three bullies barged into the classroom. They marched over to the table where the boy was sitting.

“Oh! Little idiot is reading fairy tales!” said one of the bullies, before roaring with laughter.

Extremely annoyed, the boy sitting at the table rose to his feet, stuffed the paper into his pocket, and stormed out of the classroom. The boy’s name was Sam, an 11-year-old boy. He was extremely intelligent, and the youngest student in his high school. He also had a very good imagination.

We all believe in different things, some reality and some fantasy. Fairy tales are often considered childish, and make-believe. However, Sam believed that some fairy tales were real and that magic actually existed. He especially believed the tale about the Yellow Mountains, also known as China’s Magical Mountains. Legend has it that deep in the mountains lived a wise wizard who understood the power of magic. Sam would often be teased for talking about his belief in the magic wizard, causing him to doubt himself. Finally, he couldn’t stand the bullying any longer and decided to unravel the truth once and for all.

“ I will prove that magic exists.” Sam said.

The following day, he boarded a plane and flew to the home of the Yellow Mountains in Anhui Province, eastern China. His mission was to seek out the temple where the magical wizard was thought to have lived and find out whether magic really exists.

He arrived at the foot of the mountains where the wizard lived according to the fairy tale.

*“To find the magic that you seek,
take the third road on the left,
follow the path forward no matter how steep,
on to the highest peak, you may be the wizard’s guest.”*

Sam peered up at the majestic mountains that stood before him. The peaks were blanketed in a thick white morning mist. He then began his journey onto the faint path up the mountains.

The terrain of the mountain was rocky, it’s surface was barren, with no trees. As Sam progressed up the mountain, he felt the air become thinner and with it he noticed the landscape become greener. Barren ground merged into thick trees. The sound of a stream could be heard as he continued along the narrowing, rocky path. He soon came to a crossroad. Unsure of the direction to take, Sam then recalled part of the tale he had read.

*“Far left corner which you can see,
there’s a waterfall in front of me,
my place lies behind,
which if you seek, you will find.”*

It was clear to him now that the only thing he had to do was continue left, following the sound of the trickling water. As he forged ahead, the sound of the water became louder, thundering down from above. Sam then realised he arrived at the famous Baizhang Waterfall, this marked the halfway point of his journey. The path became steep as he continued to climb. As he approached the end of the road along the cliff-side, a humongous rock blocked the narrowing path.

Sam decided that the only way to carry on his journey was to climb around the side of the cliff. Gripping the wall hard, he slowly edged sideways, there were small rock steps on the side of the cliff’s wall which appeared in the shape of a dragon. He stepped onto the rocks to help him balance, when something strange happened.

Suddenly, the dragon-shaped rock became life-like shifting from left to right, then as sudden as it happened, it became still again. Sam was shocked, he shook his head so vigorously, that it caused him to slip and fall off the cliff. His scream echoed among the mountain ranges as Sam fell, landing on the ground below.

When he regained consciousness, Sam was soaking wet and realized that he was lying in a shallow pond, he looked around to find himself in a cave behind the Baizhang Waterfall.

Sam recited another part of the fairy tale aloud:

*“You’ll come upon a rock along the way,
Behind it, silver apple trees grow every day.
Pass the door that lies behind,
A hybrid statue is what you’ll find.”*

He spun around and walked toward the triangular rock, it was so dark that Sam couldn’t make out what lay beyond the dim light. His instincts told him that undoubtedly he was heading in the right direction. With his mind made up, he walked ahead.

He spread out his arms, feeling his way around. After bumping into a few rocks, he came across a doorway. Feeling curious, Sam kicked open the door, and a blinding flash of light illuminated out from the doorway. Sam squinted as he struggled to open his eyes. Then what he saw stunned him.

The path presenting him was golden, ahead stood a three-storey temple. The temple’s roof was blood red and walls were shimmering silver. There were trees with silver-coloured apples bordering each side of the path. The place appeared to be inside the Yellow Mountain, shielded from sunlight, but the trees grew brightly. Sam’s jaw dropped in shock. He pinched himself, and as he felt the pain, it confirmed that he was not dreaming.

For years he believed in the fairy tale, but he never ever believed that he would one day end up in the magical place of his dreams. He slowly walked through the garden, taking in the view. It felt like many days passed when he finally reached the door to the temple. Just as the fairy tale had described it, there stood the hybrid statue, part human, part dragon. It looked impressive but weird. At first, Sam did not know what to do, but then he turned his head and caught sight of a rusty sign with faded words on it:

Answer the question and you will be able to enter: The legendary beast of China, a fire breathing creature, also known to be the most magical creature. What is its name?

“A dragon.” Sam answered.

Then the door opened and Sam stepped in without hesitation.

Suddenly, the room burst into brightness. An old man appeared in the centre of the room, he had long silver hair, and a short white beard, his blue eyes met Sam's, and for a moment they stared at each other.

Then Sam broke the silence, “Is this real, or is it just my imagination?”

“It is very real,” the wizard said, “So, do you believe in magic? What is it you seek?”

“Is it real, then?” Sam asked eagerly.

The wizard smiled,

“If you truly believe, only then will you discover. If you never believed in magic, you would never have come. You will discover that it is more important to believe in the magic within yourself, than to prove its existence to others.”

“So magic exists.” Sam muttered to himself, getting excited.

“Yes.” the old wizard said.

“The most complex magic is to believe that the impossible is possible. You are one of the few that have mastered it, during your journey here.”

The old wizard took a long breath, and pulled out a long stick, most likely a wand.

“So, magic exists in you now, use it well.” he said.

With a flick of the wizard's wand, Sam travelled back to the school that he left days ago.

Sam found himself at the gates of his school. His adventure was over, but the magic had just begun. The school bell rang, signalling the end of lunch. Sam entered the school and made his way back to class.

“I wonder if I really have magical powers,” Sam whispered to himself.

Then, in front of him stood the bullies.

“Where have you been, idiot? We didn't see you during lunch!” the bullies aggressively yelled at Sam.

Sam became anxious and his hungry stomach began to make loud, rumbling noises. The bullies burst into laughter. Then, the most amazing thing happened. Sam placed his hand into his apparently empty pocket and felt a tingle in the tips of his fingers. Something squishy materialized into his hand. He pulled it out, and to his astonishment, it was an egg and luncheon meat sandwich, his favourite.

“Thanks to China's Magical Mountains, I've learnt the precious lesson of the importance of self-confidence and courage.” he whispered thoughtfully.

Ignoring the bullies, Sam grinned to himself, slumped into his seat, and began to munch on his sandwich while reminiscing about his magical adventures to the Yellow Mountains of China.

The Destiny That Lies Within

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Ali, Raahim – 12

Part 1: Biyu

A sudden creaking noise diminished the solace of my wooden room. Then another. And another. I started to realize that the disturbing sounds were getting closer. I knew what this meant as the final creaking sound was a stomp on the floor next to me. My eyes shot open as I looked toward my window and saw the sun glaring in my face, taunting me as it knew what kind of hell would be brought upon me today.

“Biyu you lazy girl! Get up!” The monster before me bellowed. I sat up from my bed with my short and messy black hair. I looked up to see her evil face. She had pale skin and pitch-black hair like a demon. No part of her showed any kindness or love. Just pure hatred. Especially toward me.

“Biyu! Go to the market and buy a bag of rice. You forgot to buy it yesterday so you will make up for it today. If you don’t, no dinner tonight at all!” Chenguang exclaimed while heating water fresh from a river. I knew if I sighed, I would get scolded as Chenguang does not tolerate disrespect. So I put on my small brown boots and put my little bag over my shoulder. I opened the door, and the sunlight shot me down with its apathetic power which almost made me fall over. I mustered all my strength. The market was packed with people buying weapons for hunting or seeds for growing. I slipped my way through the crowd of people to get to one specific shop that I always got rice from Bojing’s shop.

“Ah, Biyu! I was wondering when you would show up!” He said excitedly. Bojing was a large man with not much hair but made up for it with a vast, grotesque mustache. His shop was a little wooden shack that was filled with vegetables, rice, and other food.

“Hello, Bojing. Just the usual for today.” I replied with a monotone voice

“What’s the matter? Was it Chenguang again?” Bojing asks

“Who else could it possibly be?”

“I’m sorry Biyu, but remember to hold out hope. Your father will come back one day!”

“I might have believed you when I first came here, but not anymore. My father has been gone for so long. Now, just a bag of rice please.” Bojing sighed. He grabbed a bag of rice off of a wooden shelf, which revealed a wide white book.

“Bojing, what’s that?” I asked pointing to the book

“Ah, that’s a tale of the Pills of Immortality.” He said to me.

“The Pills of Immortality?”

“Yes, it is said that long ago, the emperor Huang Di refined Pills of Immortality in the mountains. Pills that could grant you the power of living forever! He named the mountains on which he made the Pills of Immortality, Yellow Mountain.”

“Huangshan? The mountain right next to Xidi Village? We live in Xidi! Why haven’t——”

“The people of Xidi and alchemists before have looked for these pills, but the search had no results. So for now, it’s just a myth.”

Just a myth

Just a myth

The words echoed through my mind as I looked out my bedroom window.

“Pills of Immortality?” I thought

"If I had those, I wouldn't need Chenguang. I wouldn't need chores in my life. I wouldn't need this awful life! But Bojing said it was a myth..." I looked out the window and saw the sunset behind Huangshan.

"My destiny lies there, in Huangshan."

Part 2: Chenguang

I heard a strange ruckus upstairs. Wood clattered and made the ceiling rumble. I raced upstairs with my cloak sliding on the wooden stairs.

"Biyu?!" I shouted.

"What has this stupid girl done now?" I thought to myself. I opened her door and suddenly saw the wooden window opened. Biyu's entire room was empty. Her closet of clothes, the leather sack she carries when going out to do chores. All of it was gone. I ran to the window and looked out. She was nowhere to be seen. The first person I thought of was Bojing, the only person with who Biyu was friends. I ran out of the house and dashed toward his shop.

"Biyu has most likely escaped to Huangshan. She learned about the Pills of Immortality hidden deep within Huangshan." Bojing said with a concerned look.

"But that's just a myth?"

"That's what I told her but—"

"YOU told her?"

"She learned it by herself when she saw a book on my shelf." I put my hand on my forehead in anxiety. Could she have gone to Huangshan? When the sun is setting? I raced for the exit. Bojing suddenly stopped me.

"I do have one question Ms. Chenguang," He said with a serious face

"What?" I said with a face of worry and confusion

"Why?"

I raced past the exit of Xidi village as I ran towards Huangshan. I went for the stony path up the mountain. It was getting dark and my heart was filling up with fear as I worried for her safety. I reached the stony platform, out of breath, and fearing the worst. Suddenly, I saw Biyu sobbing in the mist. A wave of relief swept over me. She hadn't been able to make it far after all in the unfamiliar Huangshan mountain. I wanted to scold her. But I couldn't.

"Why?" Bojing had asked me back at his shop with a serious face.

"Why, what?" I replied with a confused face.

"Biyu tells me about you. Making her do such harsh things for no reason. She left for Huangshan because of you." I sighed and sat back down.

"Biyu may not remember, but I remember as clear as day," I whispered with a tinge of regret.

"Many years ago, I used to live with my father, mother, and sister Jing in Hongcun village. We all lived happily together in a big home. I loved my sister with all my heart. One fine day, Jing, suddenly broke the news that she loves a man named Gang. Our parents didn't approve as Gang didn't have a good reputation. But Jing was in Love. She married Gang against our wishes and left the house for good with no trace. I missed my sister and was Angry, angry that I might never be able to see her again. Years passed and we made peace with Jing not being a part of our lives anymore. But one day, we suddenly received a message from Gang that my sister has passed away and he needs our help in Xidi village where he lived. I was shocked by the news and blamed Gang but was also eager to find answers so I left for Xidi."

“I arrived at Gang’s home and knocked on their door. Gang opened the door. I wanted to confront Gang but he dropped another bombshell, they had had a daughter together, Biyu, and there was no one to look after her. I decided to stay the night to think things over. The next day I discovered that Gang had disappeared in the dark of the night just like he did the last time with Jing. I will never know the full story behind what happened to my sister. But now I was stuck with this little girl Biyu. My parents were angry at Gang and also never accepted Biyu. They passed away not long after. I felt a responsibility toward Biyu but she also repulsed me because she had the eyes and face of Gang and constantly reminded me of him and what he might have done to my sister”

“Chenguang, maybe you wanted to hate Biyu because of everything that had happened to you. You lost your sister, but all Biyu has ever needed is someone to care for her. All she needs is a mother.” Bojing softly told me.

I don’t know what I did after I saw her, but I ended up finding myself hugging her with all my might while sobbing with her.

“Why are you hugging me? You hate me. You’ve hated me all my life.” Biyu said between tears

“And I’m sorry. I blamed everything on you for no reason. Your father left me here in this village with no friends and family. I blamed everything on a young girl who wanted nothing but a life where people would care for her. I’m sorry Biyu, I failed you.” I said with a heavy heart.

I don’t know how long we sat upon the mountain, but as I stood up the sun rises and washed over Biyu and me. I don’t know what will happen after this, I don’t. But I smile to myself and I confidently extend my hand to Biyu like I had never done before.

Planes

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Cheng, Jai-An Zoe – 12

March 5th, 1943

Menri Snow Mountains

Yunnan

“Gyatso, look! A plane!”

My younger brother tugs on my arm, pointing towards the sky. A plane. We’ve been seeing a lot of them lately. The first one came over fifty days ago. Sometimes they fly off to the east. Sometimes they fly to the west. Sometimes they go either way but suddenly begin to descend, disappearing behind the mountains as the sun does when it sets. After all this time, my brother Norbu is still amazed by them, shouting whenever he sees one. I am not as easily excited, but I still have one question.

“Norbu, why do all the planes look the same?” I ask my brother.

Norbu looks at me, an indecipherable expression on his face. “I mean, don’t all the trees look the same to you? Why wouldn’t planes?”

“If I really try, I can tell the differences between them,” I say. “But the *planes* are *identical*.”

“Maybe they’re just too far to see,” Norbu suggests. “I bet if we went up higher, we could get a better look at them!”

I nod. No one has ever tried to go to the peak of the mountain we live on. It’s dangerous and cold, with altitudes that would handicap even the best of climbers. But I don’t have the heart to remind Norbu of this. *Maybe there’s a place where we can see the planes in detail without going to the peaks*, I think. *The mountains are tall, after all. “Higher up” doesn’t mean all the way.*

Norbu interrupts my train of thought with another shout. “Gyatso... look!”

I don’t look up. “Is there another plane?”

Norbu shakes his head furiously. “No, just look!”

I direct my gaze upward. The plane is getting closer and closer, in the same sudden descent I’ve seen so many times. It’s wobbling arbitrarily, and I can’t tell where it will land. But as it gets closer, I think one thing — *we’re standing within the blast radius.*

I grab Norbu’s hand and jerk him to the side as the plane plummets to the ground. It lands in a spot where it wouldn’t have hit us to begin with. None of the newly formed debris would have even touched us. But I had to be safe. I open my mouth to speak, not knowing what to say. “Norbu...”

He screams, a high-pitched sound that almost seems to pierce the air. It echoes through the valley. Smoke billows from the crashed plane in similar intensity. I try to look through the smoke, my mind racing. *There’s probably someone in there. I don’t think planes just fly themselves.* “Norbu, be quiet.”

“It’s on *fire*,” he cries.

Indeed it is. It’s warming the frozen ground around it. I focus on the small window in the metal. “Is there water nearby?” I ask my brother, trying to stay calm.

I watch as he dashes to and fro. “I... think there’s a river somewhere near here,” he says. “Come with me or give me your bucket.”

We had been on a trip to get water from the river. I toss my bucket to Norbu, and he takes off running. Then I turn to the plane and holler, “Is anyone there!?”

I think I see a slight movement from within the haze. I call out again as Norbu comes up behind me with two full buckets of water. He moves to douse the plane in the icy liquid when I take one of the buckets. “Norbu, I’ll do it. Stay here.”

Norbu doesn’t object, knowing I wouldn’t let him try. I quickly throw the water over the plane. The blaze doesn’t go out completely, but I can get closer now. There is clearly a person in the cockpit. I get closer and extend my hand, hoping the person is alright. He takes my hand and I pull him out of the smoke. I know immediately he isn’t Tibetan or Chinese. His sleeve is burning. He bats at it and somehow manages to put out the flames. “Are you alright?” I ask, although he definitely isn’t. I just pulled him from a fire.

The man raises an eyebrow and says something in response, something I don’t understand. I know my confusion is showing on my face. Seeing this, he pauses a moment, then asks something. I recognize one word.

“English?” I turn around. “Norbu, I think this man is American.”

Americans have been visiting our village and our mountains since I learned to pull a weed. Some of the villagers have learned English, the language they usually speak. Norbu nods and runs forward, gesturing to himself, the man, and the direction our village is in. The man understands, and I help him walk as we follow Norbu. We turn our backs on the fire. The smoke continues to rise uninterrupted.

We get home within ten minutes. My mother and my sister, Dorji, are sitting and eating. They both stop as soon as they see the man. My mother asks, “Who is this?”

“Mom, we found this man in a crashed plane,” I explained. “He’s burnt and injured, and we can’t talk to him because he only speaks English. Help?”

My mother nods and stands up. “Norbu, take care of Dorji,” she instructs.

“But I want to talk to him,” he protests. Despite that, he sits down and starts eating his food, keeping an eye on Dorji. I leave my food to get cold on the table.

His name is David. He flew in from India as part of a mission to supply American troops with supplies. He planned to land further out in Yunnan. He says the mission is part of a large operation they call the India–China Ferry. All the planes that passed over before were allegedly part of this operation. He is indeed American, and as we speak amongst ourselves, a look of confusion appears on his face. When our translator asks why, he says he’s never heard our language spoken, and that it’s incredibly different from English. I laugh at that. English is the language that’s different to me. It sounds and looks nothing like Tibetan or Mandarin. In fact, I almost can’t believe it has meaning at all. Only by the intent look on the translator’s face as he listens to the words being spoken do I know for sure that it isn’t just drivel.

The translator says we’ll help him recover, and then he’ll need to return to India. My mother orders me to go home.

March 12th, 1943
Menri Snow Mountains
Yunnan

It’s been seven days since the crash.

David is nowhere near fully recovered, but he insists on returning to India now. The same man who translated for us will be going with him to make sure he gets there safely, and to see India along the way. A crowd has gathered at the edge of the village to bid them farewell. Norbu, Dorji, and I are in it. My mother is giving them supplies to make the trip when David pulls a small stack of papers from his coat pocket. The translator says, “Gyatso, Norbu, he wants to give those to you.”

I take the paper stack. *Photographs*. And depicted in the photographs are planes. Norbu’s eyes light up. “Gyatso! We can see them now! The planes, I mean.”

I remember the sight of the plane the last time I saw it. It had been fairly large, a light shade of gray. The dark gray plane in the grainy photo at the top of the stack is compact, with only room for one person, no cargo. I move the photo to the back of the pile. The plane depicted in the photo I see now is akin to the one David crashed in, but a long string of numbers is painted on the side. I don't remember the numbers on David's plane, but I know they didn't look like this.

"See?" Norbu says excitedly. "The planes are even more different than the trees! You can actually see it, right from the start!"

I laugh and ruffle his hair. "You were right. Up close they look nothing alike." I look at the next photo. Another dark gray plane, but now it's a different shape. So strikingly different from the others. I'm amazed I ever thought they could be the same.

It's almost magic.

December 27th, 1952

Dukezong

Yunnan

My wife holds our baby, born just yesterday, in her arms. She looks up at me with weary eyes. Neither of us can remember how it feels to have the energy to smile. "What are we naming him?" she asks.

I stare at the baby's face. "David," I say with startling conviction.

"David?" my wife asks. "What does that mean?"

What does David mean? I turn my head towards the sky. It means war. It means differences. It means Norbu, my dear brother Norbu who I will never get to see again.

"Planes," I answer.

Up Above the Sky

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Li, Shily – 13

The midnight blue sea of a thousand twinkling eyes shone upon us as we continued our journey towards the top of Mount Emei. Us, is me, Bai, and Luo. Luo is my grandpa's mule and Bai is my beloved mountain goat. Me, well, I'm Ling. The three of us are embarking on a journey to find the Great Celestial Dragon. Myth in my village is said that the Great Celestial Dragon guards the heavenly palace of the gods. The dragon will pass by Mt. Emei once every year during the Lunar New Year, when the mountain is fully covered with fog. But I don't think it's simply a myth; there's more to that, I know it, and I want to see it. I felt Luo tugging on the reins as he bobbed his head up and down signaling to me that he wishes to rest now. I pulled on the rusty reins tenderly to tell Luo to stop. Sliding off the saddle, I led Luo over to a spot between two close resting trees. I got out a piece of stale bread and an apple from the saddlebag on Luo's back. Finishing my own dinner, I split the apple in two, and fed Luo and Bai. I sat with my back pressed against the rough trunk of a tree and closed my eyes. I heard a soft thump and felt Bai curling up beside me. Weaving my fingers in Bai's knotted coat, I took a deep breath and fell into the black reviving void that is sleep.

I yawned while placing my knuckles against my eyes, trying to rub the sleep away. The barely breaking—through sunray shined upon Bai's more cream yellow than white fur as she stood on sleepy legs and balanced herself. Luo was standing by the other tree picking at the wet grass. The fog was getting thicker and thicker every day. "Come on, let's go, we don't have much time." I hurried to Luo and lifted myself to the saddle. Taking the reins, I gave a soft kick on the side of Luo's belly, and abruptly he responded with a swift, steady trot. Bai then came up beside us with a faster trot to make up the difference in leg lengths. As we continued going up the mountain, the murky feeling began to settle in. It seems as if the obscurity feeling got more intense the further we went. I know it's not just me because I had felt the hesitating steps Luo was taking when we got to parts where there were thicker mists. And how Bai was eyeing the indistinct shapes accompanying us. A screeching bird's call, the crack of a branch, or the flutter of wings, whatever it was, it had caused a sudden stop in the clipping and clopping of hooves. I saw that Luo's ears shifted into a more erect position, and Bai clustered closer to us, her furry legs looked rigid as stone. I could feel the coldness seeping into the bare skin underneath the layers of clothing, sending shivers dancing along my arms. The eerily silence was getting to all of us, especially with the additional heavy mist and fog. I looked around in trepidation, I wasn't sure if we should keep going. *What if something bad actually happens?* All of a sudden, I felt hot and cold at the same time. My hands and arms were shivering while I felt the beads of sweat cling to my neck and forehead. I was breathing a little too fast; one breath in, two breaths out. I looked from left to right vigilantly, finding nothing but more fog. I clenched the reins until my knuckles were white with anxiety. The precipitated rustle of something sent me shaking and trembling with terror. There was a constant beat pounding in my ears, getting faster and louder. I tried not to think about where I am right now and who I am headed to see. I felt Luo skittering in place, effected by me and my doubts. If I don't want to lose control right now, I must get myself together. Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I thought of other things. *What would it be like to see the Great Celestial Dragon? But what if there was no dragon at all?* I pushed that thought further into my mind and tried not to dwell on it. Unwrapping the tense arms around my chest that I didn't remember being there, I exhaled slowly, letting all the doubts flow away. After I collected myself, I clucked my tongue gently, sending Luo into a brisk trot. The clipping and clopping broke the silence once again. Bai kept close to us, and I sensed the uneasiness radiating off of her. The dread of the truth crept up on me gradually and unwavering. Unexpectedly, Luo stopped right in his tracks, causing me to fall on his thick mane. I straightened myself up and noticed why. The fog was too thick here, you couldn't even see beyond one meter. "It's okay, nothing to be afraid of. Go on, it'll be fine." I urged Luo while putting pressure in my stirrups, using my heels to close in on the belly's flesh. But he was too stubborn, still refusing to go on. I sighed as I heaved myself down the saddle and tried to pull him forward. It wasn't working, I furrowed my brows. Something must be really wrong, or else Luo wouldn't be like this. "Stay here," I told both of them and walked on carefully. Bai made a frantic sound as if to tell me to stop. Stretching my arms with my hand up in front, and taking slow measured steps, I went on cautiously. All of a sudden, I felt nothing under my right foot, like my foot was hanging on thin air. I withdrew my foot and scrambled back. Landing on all fours, I felt the tiny pebbles indenting my palms and knees. Trying to feel the earth with my outstretched hands, it hit me. This was the edge of Mount Emei. We were here.

Now that we reached our destination, I wasn't sure if I should accomplish my mission. As I was thinking about my choices, a dark form appeared out of the blue, swishing above me. Moving at whirlwind speed, I thought it had a snake-like figure. The blur kept on circling deep in the clouds. The more I look at it, the more terror spread from my heart. I tasted the raw, metallic sweetness of blood in my mouth as I continued to bite the insides of my cheek. *This was it. It's now or never.* I knew that if I didn't find the truth now, I may not be brave enough to endure the journey and go this far again. *It's a once in a lifetime kind of opportunity, Ling. Don't you want to know the truth? But what if it's not there? What if I was wrong about everything? You might as well try while you're here. This is where you wished to be, go now and see.* I could almost imagine the devil and the angel bickering about on my shoulders. I shoved the thoughts aside and breathed in the moist air, "I will do this. I will try." I summoned all my courage and felt the adrenaline rushing through me, from my curling toes to the tips of my hair, filling me with anticipation. I extended my left hand up through the thin sheet of cloud coating the sky. The dense mist made the lost strands of black hair curl around my pale cheeks. My breath caught as I felt something as smooth as the finest silks in China, and as sharp as the best blade, slither past my trembling hand. I looked up in awe at the indescribable mix of green and blue with the perpetual hazy red and orange of colors blurring past. Suddenly, a glaring crimson orb swished by, and for a moment, everything faded away to just me and the dragon. I could see the desiring eye of this fearsome, powerful, and beautiful creature. The blazing eye with metallic golden streaks shooting out from the obsidian pupil consumed me, burning my body with exhilaration. The crimson orb blinked and there was an imperceptible nod. And just as suddenly as it came, it disappeared again, in the mass of the slithering body.

Long after the Great Celestial Dragon had left, I still stood unmoving. The fog lessened, the clouds parted, and the wind picked up. The breeze caught my hair and played with it, swirling about my face. I was so struck, the only thing reminding me that the dragon was actually real were my fingertips that still tingled from the memory of the lingering touch. There was nothing to say or think as I tilted my head backwards and looked up above the sky.

The Patience of Trees

Shanghai American School – Pudong Campus, Mei, Michelle – 12

The tree stands dragon like, the silent observer of the rocky mountains buried by the sea of clouds. The wind calls, howling through the branches of harp pine, brushing a blanket of snow to the ground. The clouds swim amongst the steep ridges and peaks, as the radiant light covers Huangshan with many coats of colour. Mountains peek above the rosy clouds, appearing like islands before the cottony layers float away as the sun reclaims the sky.

The young girl climbs towards home, exhausted by the effort of carrying bamboo for the villagers. She was so tired. Tired of living with her grandfather. Tired of mountains and trees. The snow crunched beneath Qin's straw shoes as she hurried back in the icy cold to retrieve more bamboo.

Her grandfather was bent almost double from a life of carrying baskets on poles up and down the mountains—his hands were rough and cracked—not like the not at all like the gentle hands Qin remembers from her mother's touch. Although she dearly loved her grandfather, who did his best to raise Qin, she often dreamed of her mother's touch. She dearly missed her mother who had gone to look for work in Hefei five years ago. Even though Qin was only 8 at that time, her mother gone felt like what you could call a sense of hollowness emanating from her chest. The sadness drained through Qin rather than skating over her skin. It travelled through every cell to reach the ground. And yet strangely enough, it was her crumbled soul she had to bear.

The village of Xidi was on a barren hill in a range of many barren hills near the Black Tiger Pine. Throughout winter, it was waist deep in snow and blasted by bitter winds. In the summer, the temperature was so hot it was like breathing in flames. Qin's grandfather Xi would often times tell her stories of how his father had built small round homes into the ground in this faraway village so that others would see how vast the mountains were. Unfortunately, because it was so far from civilization, few people ever saw it. Yet it was all Qin ever saw. It was her whole world.

Qin wore trousers that were patched at the knees and too long for her, and a baggy faded jacket she had mended many times. Although this was not her only jacket, it was her most prized possession. It had also been her mother's favorite, one of the few things she left behind for Qin. Every birthday, when her grandfather asked her for her wish for the upcoming year, she stated that she only wished to see her mother. Seeing her mother's empty seat at the dinner table left Qin desperate.

As heavy snow began to fall, Qin clutched the freshly cut bamboo sticks and hurried home. She knew Grandfather would be worried sick if she were still out in the cold. She could see him through the window of their small house, rubbing his sore back.

Walking inside, she tried to look away from her Grandfather, knowing that if she looked at him, he would be able to read her mind.

The handwritten card Qin had left on her mother's seat was still there from yesterday, untouched. Qin had often left something on her mother's seat ever since she could remember.

"Yeye, when is mother coming back?" Qin blurted out.

Grandfather sighed. He stared out at the falling snow, seeking the right words. He opened his mouth, but then hesitantly closed it.

"Qin, you know this. We have gone over this countless times. Your mother went to the city to find work."

"But it has been more than five years," Qin grumbled. She reached into the worn leather pouch that hung from her waist, suspended from a length of braided rope. Along with the rusty blade Grandfather gave her when she first started helping in the forest, the pouch contained only a piece of weathered wood carved into the shape of a bird – the only other thing she had that had been her mother's.

“Patience, little one. The trees on the mountains live for thousands of years. The dragons have been here for even longer. Five years is not a very long time. Be like the trees. Be patient.”

Grandfather paused, then spoke softly. “You sometimes remind me of your mother, so determined to get things done and also very stubborn,” he chuckled. “You see that knife I gave you? Before I could use this blade to carve the bird, I had to sharpen it. You are like that blade. You are growing up, but you are not yet grown. It will take time and patience to sharpen you, but until a blade is sharp, it is foolish to try to carve anything with it.”

“Don’t you even miss mother? Don’t you want to see her?” She tried to convince herself that she was not the only one who missed her mother; otherwise, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being too childish. Grandfather never mentioned mother or showed that he missed her.

“Of course, I do. But our life is here, on the mountain. You have a role, a purpose in the village. And your mother has her role. Don’t worry, little one. I am sure one day she will come back to us.”

Tears filled Qin’s eyes as she gazed out at the darkness. “That’s what you say every time. But mother is still not back!”

“Remember last year, when Unity Pine was struck by lightning? The tree’s bark was burnt and one of its limbs became a dead branch. But hidden under that skeleton was a force that sent a single shot of green out into the world. The rest of the tree stayed together. It didn’t send out one limb to look for the lost one. When they stayed together, they were able to accomplish more. And we need to stay strong and together too.” Grandfather stood up. Clutching the wall, he slowly shuffled towards Qin.

Patting her back, Grandfather smiled, “You think I don’t know what it feels like to live without someone I love? You know, before you were born your grandmother fell really ill and passed away. It felt like my soul was a piece of paper that had been crumbled and would never again be smoothed out. Those years, your mother and I were both dejected. But we stayed strong and more importantly had each other as support.”

Qin restrained herself, but inside she was boiling. Qin had enough of her grandfather’s talks. They were just words, ancient folk tales of dragons and magic. They were not what she missed the most – her mother’s voice, her mother’s touch.

That night, after Grandfather went to sleep, buried under the warmth of a blanket, Qin quietly got dressed in the darkness. She put the blade and the bird in her pouch, put on her mother’s old jacket and a pair of sturdy boots. She forced the door open, pushing against the biting wind that was trying to keep it shut.

The night was dark. No stars penetrated the heavy snow clouds.

Qin knew the path well from all her trips through the bamboo forest. Wrapping her jacket around her, tucking her hands inside the pockets, she trudged slowly down the mountain. After an hour or so, Qin was no longer so sure of the way, and the heavy snow made it difficult to see the path. Suddenly, her foot slipped out from under her, and she began falling, sliding and banging down into a deep ravine. Her consciousness faded as she lay at the bottom. The heavy snow covered her.

When she awoke, she tried to brush the snow off of her face, but only one arm was able to respond. Her heart raced, blood pounding in her temples. She knew she had to move, to get up and try to find a way back to the path. She struggled to roll over, but she felt buried by the snow. She shivered.

Just when she felt her tears freezing her eyelids, she heard a voice calling her name.

“Qin, my darling little bird. Be calm. I am here.”

It was her mother's voice. Qin blinked hard to clear her eyes. Where was this voice coming from? In the blinding snow fall, Qin saw two red dots, and as the dots came closer, she saw what appeared to be a head of a large dragon. As it opened its mouth, Qin again heard her mother's voice.

“Qin, do not be afraid. I am here, and we will always be together. Nothing can ever separate us again.”

The dragon's breath was like a warm caress, and Qin felt herself relax into memories of summer and flowers and her mother's gentle touch.

She felt her crumpled soul finally returning to its original form.

The Journey Near Heaven's Peak

Shanghai Community International School, Ng, Kai-Ying – 12

I need to get out of my world. I mean, think of all the places that explorers can go. The places that are waiting for you. Exploring the explorable and the unknown that will be found by you. Won't that be wonderful? I would rather go do all of that but instead I was stuck in my room to finish a pile of some dumb paper homework. Not just any ordinary homework, it was a gigantic mountain-sized pile of homework that was piled into many stacks and each stack was ten feet high. I was chained to that pile of dumb homework until I am finished with it. The homework was like a burden. Exactly like a boulder on top of my shoulders. This felt exactly like being behind bars when you are innocent. This was the last thing that I needed in my whole entire life. I needed to get out of there. But the problem was that the room with no exits so how could I escape?

I closed my tired eyes. I wished I could get out of here, but I know I won't. But even a little peace will do me good. I smelled cherry blossoms and moist air. I felt cool and something tingly that was like paper but not exactly like it. It was a little stiffer and harder. I heard birds chirping and the rushing of ——— something. Wait! Rushing? My paper homework must be collapsing! It might bury me alive! AHHHHH! I open my eyes. Instead of my room a mountain paradise took place. Rushing waterfalls and moist green trees was everywhere. I looked around. I was on a mountain! Misty fog surrounded me. But something was a bit different about them. They look like those breath-taking and beautiful spirits that float and move in such a graceful way. They also reminded me of those fluffy cotton candy and beautiful white clouds. It must be a dream. I must have over worked myself. I pinched my skin hard. I can feel it. I must have died from exhaustion. I must be in Heaven.

"You are here." A voice boomed. I spun around looking for that voice. But all I saw was mist and mountains. I turned around violently. I saw nothing. I hear nothing. Nothing but the wind itself. A flash of yellow appeared. It zoomed around me like crazy. Then it stopped. I looked closely at it. It was a paper dragon! I was too stunned to speak. Was I dreaming? No, it's Impossible.

"Hop on." It said. I dumbly obeyed. Dumbfounded. Then a gust of strong breeze brushed my skin and flapped my hair to make it prickle my unbelievable eyes. That's when I notice. We were flying.

"Where are we flying to?" I finally managed to find my tongue.

"Everywhere in the yellow mountains." I looked all around and above me. Colors as bright as fireworks flew past me. They were paper cranes. They flew in packs. Then more paper dragons came. The world was almost alive with colors. It was much better than my old little prison cell. Then we landed. My eyes were open so wide because of the sight before me. It was even more beautiful, breath-taking than the sight before. Even the word "beautiful" and "breath-taking" aren't the words for describing the sight before me. Origami, paper homes with mystical spirits living within. They looked beautiful. So beautiful that not even beautiful can describe it. It was also calm and busy both at the same time. I was speechless. I was really dumbfounded. I was sure that it was heaven.

"Welcome to Near Heaven's Peak!" The dragon exclaimed. I looked around. I get why it has the word heaven in the name and peak because it is on the mountain and it is breathtaking. But why 'Near'?

"This isn't heaven, but it is near it. It is like an image of heaven that only mortals and mystical living beings can come in times of need." The paper dragon sighed. But why am I here?

"We are all made of stories. If no one tells our story, one day we will disappear. If we are gone, so will you. Ella, we need you. We need you to write our story. Our magic is slowly fading. Look at it." I turned to see the magical spirits. Some of them were fading away and turning into dust. Some of them were losing color and evaporating into thin air. Some of them were crumbling and unbending their origami bodies into what they were like in the first place. The paper dragon itself was fading away fast.

I was shocked. I stepped backward. Then I lost my footing. The next thing I knew was that I was falling. Falling in the sky. Down the mountains. Trying to grasp the air as if there were a rod to hold on so I would stop falling. 'We need you. We need you to tell our story.' The dragon's voice came into my head. The whole world was spinning. Everything was turning dark. Everything from the beautiful scenery was getting wiped away like a heart-

lifting poem getting erased from a white board. Heaven was shattered. I was falling into what was like an endless pit. At last I hit the ground. My bed, actually. I sat up. I was somehow dreaming, all this time. I took a gasp of breath. I looked around me. I was in my room again. No homework in stacks. No dragons. No mountains.

'We need you. We need you to tell our story.' The dragon's voice came into my head once more.

I smiled. I opened my computer and typed: *I need to get out of my world. I mean, think of the places explorers that can go. The places that are waiting for you. Exploring the explorable and the unknown that will be found by you...*

And that is my story.

Whether you believe it or not.

The Barrier

Shanghai Community International School, Tu, Elsa – 12

Mountains buried in layers of hazy clouds, peaks peering out from drowsy fog. Rivers of mist, seeping through gaps between cliffs as they drift off into the distance. Dark green trees bathing in sunlight as the sun gazes beyond the clouds that covered cliffs. I've seen them in my dreams, over and over again. But today, it seems so realistic that I can barely keep my eyes from staring at the cliffs.

I can see the mist receding as sunlight pools over the atmosphere, the orange sky turning pristine blue, lush green trees revealed behind the curtains of smoke as afternoon comes near. But I know something. This can't be real. Eventually, I will wake up, find myself dressed in pajamas, hair tangled like crazy. I glance down at my hands and flex my fingers. It feels physically real. So physical that it seems unnatural in a dream.

Something is wrong. My gaze flits across the horizon. *Very wrong.*

I pinch myself, gasping painfully. In a few moments, I will wake up.

But no.

It never comes.

Panic shoots from the bottom of my spine.

Why won't I wake up?! I dig my fingernails into my skin again, but it is futile. I can't wake up. And I realize it. I am really here. No, not in a dream, but in the Yellow Mountains, standing on one of the cliffs above the clouds. It isn't my imagination, it is REAL.

But how did I end up *here*? My eyes dart around the area for a brief second as my hands curl into fists in vex. I try to think of the last thing I saw before bedtime. I draw in a large breath and hold it, hoping to remember the most recent thing that occurred before I discovered myself in the Yellow Mountains. The faint memories remain in my head, but I cannot recall them.

Lights. I abruptly remember. Suddenly, an roar from above makes me lose my balance. Fear tingles in my veins. The cold earth beneath my bare feet vanishes into thin air.

30 seconds pass. I am plummeting into a bottomless pit. I can already feel my oxygen deprived lungs screaming in despair, begging me to breathe again.

The lights flickering off, I recall. *Lights flickering off after bedtime passed, my mother nagging at me for going to bed late.*

The memories swoop into my mind one by one. *My brother screaming at me for destroying his Lego house, my sister arguing with my brother over the last block of Lego—*

Something hard knocks the back of my head. A tingling sensation of pain takes over my consciousness, and for a few heartbeats, I can feel nothing but the pain eating its way down my spine. I feel my head instantly bruise as my body crashes through fragile branches of a tree, like a marble being shaken in a jar. My body tumbles down a cliff, drawing red lines full of blood over my exposed skin.

I am in danger.

Suddenly, layers of white whish past my vision, and the cliffs vanish.

My fingers claw at the air, hoping to find a solid surface to cling to. But I can't find anything. Mist seeps through the gaps of my desperate fingers as my hope wanes.

My luck today is clearly far below par. I was first transported to the Yellow Mountains, then fell off of a cliff, now blinded by fog and falling to death. What do I do? My head jerks to the left. The mist is starting to clear up, and I can see the ground drawing nearer as seconds pass. Anxiety burns at the bottom of my throat, and my heart bursts. My mouth is dry. My mind spinning with thoughts. Yet I can't do anything to help myself not to get killed.

Think, Kylie, think! I tell myself. I have to come up with a solution before I make contact with the ground. I glance down once again. Jagged lines along the rocky earth welcome me with wide open arms and a crooked smile. An ominous feeling creeps upon me and one thought cancels out of the rest.

I am going to die.

I shudder at the thought but tense myself as something cold and flat knocks the air out of me. My body skids across it, and gradually halts.

Black dots swarm into my vision from the corner of my eyesight. My vision blurs, and all I can hear is the soft inhale and exhale of my breaths for a few heartbeats. Then, the sky starts to fade into a world of white.

For a moment, I fear that I will slowly drift off into a peaceful sleep. A sleep that lasts forever.

Death.

I fear a death that is slow, painless, malignant. A death that is akin to a tiny flame kindling in the darkness, diminishing and fading as a breeze recedes it to nothing. As I fight the urge to fall unconscious, I suddenly become aware of the cool surface touching my skin. It does not feel like the rocky earth I had feared to hit. It feels slippery and freezing to touch.

It makes me shiver and pull my arm away, or at least attempt to. My bruised arms lift in the air for a few seconds, then drop limply back to my sides as a hot searing pain claws into them. But the pain does not stop my determination, nor my curiosity about the magical changing ground that saved my life.

A centimeter at a time, I sit up and gaze at the surface. There are rooms beneath a transparent barrier: a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a bedroom— wait a second, IS THAT MY BED?!

I scramble to the middle and press my face closer to the flat earth. It is! A wave of relief washes over me, and for brief moment I can do nothing but feel joy shimmering inside me. I am almost home! Excitement makes me bang my fists against the clear surface, wanting it to crack open.

But contrary to my hopes, nothing happens. I punch it again, once again a futile effort. It does not crack or leave a mark. I feel frantic. I have to get back home before... before what? Before I wake up in the morning? Before mom realizes that I disappeared in the middle of the night and freaks out? Before I cease to exist in this nonexistent world?

It is too overwhelming to take in all at once. Desperation drives me to slam my knuckles onto the barrier until my hands are bloody and broken. When I realize that nothing happens and nothing will happen, I curl into a small ball and begin to cry. My tears fall freely onto the ground, and a shattering sound breaks my muffled gasps. I glance down with my tired eyes. There is a crack on the floor. Have my tears created the crack? Are they magical?

I rub my tears from my eyes onto my hands, then wipe my palm onto the ground. Another crack appears. Then another. And another.

Soon, the surface looks like a piece of shattered glass ready crash unexpectedly. If I move, the whole thing will collapse. I don't know what to do. Huh, funny enough. I don't even know what I'm *supposed* to do. All I can do is sit here, dumbfounded, listening to the slight shifting sound beneath me.

Uh—oh.

This is bad.

I am going to fall *again*.

With an earsplitting screech, the surface bursts and the floor I rest on is gone. But I am not scared. Instead, excitement tingles inside me.

This may be the path back home! As I fall, I close my eyes and imagine how my cat Fluff will react when I tell him what an experience I had in this world! My hands grip together tightly. I can already feel warmth flooding my head, my hair whipping in the wind, and see a dim light. My dark vision is replaced by a world of brightness, and I suddenly feel lighter. As I feel the conscious feeling of the blankets touching my hand, my eyes flutter open.

It is all... grey? Grey? Grey? This is weird. Excluding the fact that I have grey vision, my vision is shockingly sharper. I lift my hand up. Wait, no, paw?! Since when do I have paws?

My jaw hangs open. I can see a unique fluff of fur in the bottom of my vision. My tail swishes. My claws slide in and out of my paws.

Jaws. Fur. Tail. Paws. Claws.

A new thought is highlighted in bright red in my mind.

Did I transport into my cat's body?!

To be continued...

Exiled To The Yellow Mountains

Shanghai Singapore International School, Koh, Tian Ci Matthew Ian – 14

As day collapsed and gave way to night, a dense fog hung in the cold air. Its pointed tendrils reached out, snuffling the liveliness the day once held. Endless hours of torture followed. Winds raced across the jagged mountains, cackling and howling. Trees shivered in fright as darkness finally took over. The scent of death approached and the moon light, barely visible, flickered on the ground. A howl from afar signaled death. As the first leaf fell, strong, yet soft – footsteps were audible... just barely but still there. A pair of piercing, red irises glared through the darkness.

Wolves.

One stepped closer. A snarl adorned a scarred face, reflecting pain and death. The alpha circled; its jagged teeth visible, ready to rip you to shreds. As you back away, you stumble over a branch. You bolt up but a horrifying howl echoes behind and fear takes hold, freezing you. The wolf stares, analyzing your every move. The pack approaches, staring ravenously. You tremble nervously, desperately praying. The wolves encircle, ready for the kill. Their blood– thirsty eyes bore into yours. You stare back, eyes unflinching. You read this somewhere, long ago. The tension generates electricity. You remain unyielding. The wolf flinches. Then it bows before you. The pack soon follow – they recognize their new master. You nod curtly at the wolves before picking yourself up. They retreat into the woods where they can recover their pride. You watch their silhouettes disappear into the darkness.

You trudge back up the steep mountains. Reaching your hut, you set a fire and cook the squirrel hunted this afternoon. You unbutton your worn–out fur coat. You stare into the fire.

It's been 20 years now...

Exiled, wrongly accused of treason. Traitor.

You let out a feral scream, one full of pain and of anger. You were blindfolded, handcuffed, beaten, and dumped here. Away from civilization. You stare into the fire, absentmindedly, lost in your memories.

“They should have killed me”, you think glumly.

Your joints creak as you stand. You peer outside and witness the crack of dawn as dusk recedes. A flaming, golden ball appears through the split of the mountains – the beauty of the Yellow Mountains is restored. Now – a beautiful breeze bounces through the soft air; the lush land partied with the abundance of flora and fauna; life reignites as animals and people flock home to prepare for the day ahead.

Another day had come.

Guardians of Nature

Shanghai Singapore International School, Lim, Ming Kang Ethan – 14

The Yellow Mountains project a dominating demeanor, a looming presence and a myriad of beauty. Towering cliffs and an ocean of green, blankets its surface. This is one of the greatest landmarks in China!

The barky sea is home to an array of creatures. The towering trees advocate skillful craftsmanship of Mother Nature. Each organism adds to the ecosystem creating a perfect equilibrium of plants and animals. The life cycle present at every turn, each stage can be seen – birth, aging, death – repeated. A place untouched by human pollution, free from the chains of smoke and steel that hinders the growth of life. Wildlife here finds refuge amongst the sheltering trees and hide from the greed of man, their killing and destruction. From the Red-billed Leiothrix: a small pudgy bird with warm colored feathers, to the stump-tailed macaque, a monkey-like creature with a minute tail and a red fur that plastered its face: variety of critters and creatures live here.

Safe.

At HOME.

A Stone Age resides around this garden where rock golems walk. Cliffs reflect the golden yellow of the Sun. The Yellow Mountains receive their name from the Emperor Huang Di who once ruled over this land. The monument is in honor of the legendary Emperor, the first ruler of China, a majestic god in their folklore. These mountains are kingly and godlike, imposing and overwhelming. They are the ‘Guardians of Nature’ – giants that rise high showing off the wonder of the world we reside in. These unyielding mountains demonstrate the work of HIS HAND.

Protectors.

An exalted landmark.

A gift from the heavens.

HOME.

Shrouded In Mists of Mystery

Shanghai Singapore International School, Phoon, Yu Ying Gretel – 15

Eastwards, resided an emperor who was shrouded in mists of mystery. His arms were caressing, comforting, reassuring. Whispers as soft as a lullaby, light as a feather, filled the air while a gentle wave of serenity, soothed the loneliness.

The emperor stood tall and imposing: a massive, towering giant looming over his fellow subjects, equally majestic and ethereal. Faded—wood brown adorned with spots of shamrock green dotted here and there, thickening into a tide as it went down his back. Fluffy, ivory cotton candy floated peacefully in the sky, occasionally obscured from the hazy mist. The soft, mournful howls of the winds raced past the emperor, filling up the unwanted silence.

It was a pity; such a magical place... forgotten, abandoned.

~ 5000 years ago ~

The sky was a warm blanket of the beautiful, sparkling hue of an ocean. A kaleidoscope of colours exploded like a shower of fireworks in the sky after a moment of rain, igniting the sky. The invigorating winds ran around energetically like children playing tag, exuberantly and jokingly chiding each other.

Swollen, orange—red, juicy persimmons dangled off the outstretched arms of trees. They hung heavily, weighing the tired arms down, turning from apple green to tomato red. The juicy, honey sweet syrup of the fruit dripped onto the ground, feeding the busy ants, under the dazzling sun. The aromatic scent of the fruit hypnotised multi—coloured birds like baited fish, taunting them. The sweet—smelling fragrance intoxicated them causing them to tweet in excitement; and the fruit glowed invitingly in the radiant light. An array of birds fluttered eagerly to the fruits, freeing the exhausted arms of the trees from the heavy, mouth—watering burden.

The emperor stood tall and mighty. He wore a cloak of yellow—brown, glinting in the dazzling gold of the sun, god—like. The sun god. Smooth rock with streaks of different hues of brown; some light and some dark blended into each other perfectly like the blue does with the green of the ocean. His peaks rose and fell like the tips of a crown, glinting blindingly as if made from gold. Emeralds, jades, peridots and apatite adorned his cloak, glistening in the sunlight as if glowing. Full of pride and joy, commanding and protecting the land.

But nothing lasts forever. Not even the greatest.

~ 1000 years later ~

The sky was an empty void. Soupy and unwelcoming, bringing no warmth to the land below. All the warmth and colours had bled out. Left behind was sense of loneliness and sadness. There was no point in anything anymore. There was no sign of day nor night. It was always stormy with a wild wind that pummelled everything in its path with no mercy.

A sinister silence dominated.

Except for the wind.

Except for the wind and the storm.

The howls of the wind were like cries — painful, full of torment and anguish, whimpering and wailing as if in eternal agony, begging and pleading. The tornadoes ripped everything to shreds, flooding, destroying. Then spitting everything out. Loud and thunderous, bellowing at everything. The roar of the thunder beat out every sound possible. The zap of the lightning lit the night sky. The storms were destructive, ripping chunks of rock, uprooting trees, flooding the land until it was a murky pool with debris floating in it. It was worse than a war zone!

No fruits or birds lingered. Everything left and never returned. The forest once a map of green – now dull and bland. Everything was plain. The forest was plain, too plain! Even the emperor was plain.

The emperor, who once burned bright and mighty, now hunched over in shame and solitude. All traces of his former glory gone, replaced with a bitter shell of his former self. Once so grand, mighty and welcoming, reduced to nothing more than shadows.

The mountains were a slab of cement—grey, scarred like scratched wood that had been left to rot. Chunks of rock had eroded to haphazard shapes and sizes. Dark greenish plants and trees crept their way up the mountain's body like moss and lichen on an abandoned building, unwanted and invasive. Soon, not a single part of the mountain would be seen. It was like a war, with the emperor on the losing side. It was like an old house, unloved and forgotten.

Until one day...

~ Present ~

The clouds were white again – snowy, ivory white. They floated lightly, resembling cotton balls. The plants and trees were greener and livelier. The emperor and his subjects yielded to mother nature, slowly embracing the land – standing tall and mighty once again, though not as mighty as before. The same sadness and loneliness prevailed.

But the emperor had changed. Still a slab of grey granite but the scars had slowly faded. The rock was smooth, the rough edges moulded by the wind and the water. Yet nothing could heal the hole in his heart. It was a barren land. Forgotten. The absence of the sweet singing angels, who would feed on the overly ripen fruits stabbed at his heart. The air was once filled with the choir of heavenly voices, singing a sweet melody, serenading the emperor.

Now...

all that was left was the melancholic wail of the winds...

all that was left was a ghost of what once was.

The emperor sat on his lush, leafy throne, longing for the day a wandering soul would visit. Trees wound their long emerald and coffee coloured arms upwards, covering the bare back of the emperor like a blanket to comfort him. He sat alone, shrouded in mists of mystery.

Forgotten Treasure

Shanghai Singapore International School, Roslee, Aina Sofia Binti – 14

Stone—cold, ancient rock — once royalty. Foot massages of silky—smooth water and minerals, fresh air from green, royal guards and gifts of offerings by tiny ants. Once loved for but now forgotten. Hidden like a princess taken hostage.

Waiting,
Waiting.
Slowly turning
Into
D
U
S
T.

The cracked skin of the earthly monsters burned under the glaring light from the ball of fire. Infected moss and fungus over power the brown. The sickly mountain, faded yellow with worms and slugs infesting its body. The white, dreamy mist from the skies; unfortunately, wasn't enough to cure the mountains. Soon the parasitic vegetation took over like a giant virus. Their sickness dominated. Their body changed from yellow to a dirty brown. The strong winds bellowed through the mountains, making them shiver as the rocks slowly erode. They were worthless and a burden.

Crushed by the heavy weight of the giants, the once king—like throne disappears. It was the most treasured piece of crafted art; with twisting branches that intertwined with random speckles of green — the softest, silkiest, smoothest of leaves that created a cushion for the giant. Then man spoke. It was too costly; it took too much space. There were too many giants. The blueprints were burned and thrown away like shards of glass. The only remains were the broken branches and lost leaves at the base of each sickly mountain. Fragments of time, never to be uncovered—slowly decomposing and vanishing into thin air.

The yellow emperor; a tall intimidating stature, radiated gold light, blinding all. Some celebrated their emperor's success while others scurried away like whining rats. His rule was once peaceful but all good comes to end. He saw the giants' scars, he put ointment on their wounds, he talked with each mountain, giving solutions. Sadly, as he aged, he got sickly and couldn't take care of the mountains anymore. It was time for him to take care of himself. Soon after, he was called to the sky, disappearing like a mist.

The giants mourned
And waited
For help
But it never came...

The icy, frost penetrated their souls. The tiny, parasites infected their bodies. Trash was dumped in their homes. Fumes so toxic invaded the air. Water that once brought life and rejuvenation to the mountain was now contaminated. Thousands of tourists eroded the history and beauty of their native soil. The mountains were sick and slowly rotting.

A house was hidden in the mountain. It was made of dark wood and consumed by giant trees. Broad, wooden staircases led to a small balcony where a lonely rocking chair swayed in the breeze. A pink—faced boy strolled to the living room with tired eyes. A tall man sat in an oak chair waiting. They had started their life in this giant.

As the seasons changed, so did the people. Tourists came, took photos and then forgot. Its hidden beauty in a camera roll, buried by endless selfies.

Alone, once again. Still sick. The ancient, stone rock is covered by the blanket of the night. The wind, sky and leaves try to comfort these sleeping giants.

The clock strikes twelve.

It's the start of a new day, a new possibility, new hope.

Not Alone

Singapore International School, Lam, Celine Hay – 12

“Oh god.”

Rain splattered onto me as I desperately trudged through the narrow trails of Huangshan, hoping to find a shelter from the rain. As I murmured upon my cruddy luck, a weak light flashed upon me. I blinked my droopy eyes. The light flashed again.

The rain got heavier and heavier as I pondered on whether I should follow the weak signal. But there was simply no choice.

I had to.

Dragging my drained body through the downpour was no easy task, I was drenched, I was starving, I was shaking. Unfortunately, the distant flash of light was my last and only hope. I knew I couldn't give up.

Without a map nor a compass, I could only trek towards the light according to my instincts, which can sometimes be inaccurate. To add fuel to fire, the light constantly died out, so it was difficult to locate the hut precisely.

Before long came nighttime, the sky slowly dimmed to a pitch black, with the moon high above the thick layers of clouds. There was simply nothing luminous. Desperate for light, I rummaged through my soaking backpack for some matches. The matches were wet.

Darn it.

Pat pat.

It's the feeling of hope, familiar, yet distant.

Alarmed, I turned around, only to see a man holding a cane. His long, white beard nearly touching the ground. He... didn't have an umbrella of any sort.

Help? Maybe not.

Murder? Maybe.

“*Ni hai hao ma?*” he questioned.

Not knowing any Chinese whatsoever, I shrugged, then turned to run for dear life.

Maybe luck isn't on my side today.

But life wasn't about luck.

I returned to the helpless, puzzled self. Not only did I have to find my way to the flashing light, I also had to run away from that menacing-looking man – which happened to be in the opposite directions.

If the man I met just now was perilous, will the anonymous man at the hut be any nicer? I might as well give up.

Where will I go now?

It was all at this moment that my entire life flashed behind me.

I was an orphan all my years till I was 18. I got married 2 years later, when I was 20, but was swiftly divorced. Not long after, I lost my job. But no, I knew I couldn't sleep on the streets for the rest of my life. Using my remaining \$1934 in my bank, I bought a ticket to the Amazon, which started my meaninglessly interesting exploration days.

For all these years, where have I been going?

More crucially, where will I go now?

Pat pat.

I shrieked in shock, my voice echoing through the mountains and trailing off into nowhere.

I turned around, only to see the same man I saw minutes ago, or was it hours?

"Are you ok?" the man questioned.

I recoiled, surprised.

The man knows English.

"I'm ok, just lost." I replied with uncertainty.

He chuckled, "getting lost in Huangshan is not ok at all, follow me!"

For a moment, he seemed nice.

Having nowhere else to go, I decided to follow the mysterious man. As we trailed through the thick trees, he picked up some branches along the way, examining here and there.

I took a moment to notice where he was bringing me – the hut.

The walk was suspiciously quiet, all I could hear was the silent crunch and rustle of my footsteps and the occasional sound of the man collecting twigs.

Before long, we arrived at the hut – a place where I longed to arrive. Though, at this very moment I wasn't as thrilled as I thought I would be. Instead, I feel ashamed. I needed help. This local man had to rescue me. I am weak.

Or am I?

Nervous giggles surrounded me as I stepped into the dim hut, the old man swiftly brought up a warm cup of Chinese tea. I shyly thanked him and gulped down the warm tea. I have neither eaten nor drunk for the past... 4 hours? Yet I have been trekking the whole time. To me, the tea was hope sent from heaven.

After settling down the kids, the old man sat on the stiff chair next to me. I offered him the comfy sofa I was sitting on, but he refused.

"What are you at Huangshan for?" he asked, curious.

"Nothing much, just trekking all the significant mountains over the world." I answered, then turned my head to stare into the already empty teacup in my hand.

"Do you want another cup of tea?" he offered.

“It’s ok, don’t worry about me, I’m alri—”

He stopped me mid-sentence, shoving another cup of tea in my hand.

“I hope I don’t offend you, but do you really have that many kids?” I delicately asked.

He turned silent, gestured me towards the back of the house, behind the curtains.

He never said a word to me again, or at least I think he didn’t.

Although he didn’t know much English, nor did I know any Chinese, it seemed that we communicated seamlessly. We used awkward, cocky hand signs to deliver our messages. The kids often scanned me from head to toe, peculiar about this strange foreign man. The old man would give them the death stare,

“*mei li mao* (impolite)!” he would bark.

The kid would turn towards me, bow 180 degrees, then walk away with shame.

I never knew that Chinese kids were that courteous.

I must have lost track of time, because once I got to settle down in the cozy guest room, I saw the weak sunlight, shining through the antique windows of my bedroom. I wrestled myself up, and looked through the window.

I was breathless.

The view was almost heaven-like, the light fog accompanying the golden sun, simmering above the distinctive Huangshan.

“Huacha cha-cha!” The sound of wooden sticks clashing together interrupted the peaceful sunrise. I yawned groggily, then stepped out of the room and into the backyard. There was where all the kids were, with the old man standing in the middle, monitoring and correcting each and every movement they made.

I was astonished. The level of discipline in them was indescribable.

Now this is what discipline means.

Knowing that I shouldn’t stay at the hut any longer, I packed my bags and said farewell to the old man. The old man even commanded one of the kids to guide my way out! Once again, I refused, but he insisted.

On the way out of the thick trees and back to common tourist areas, I discovered something shocking – all these children were orphans! Their parents have unluckily passed away in various accidents or illnesses. The old man was actually the leader of their tribe there and was scavenging for wooden and bamboo sticks for them to practise their Kung Fu skills. In the tribe, the orphans build a strong bond and are raised to become masters of these vulnerable Chinese martial arts.

Both orphans, yet different paths.

One strong, one weak.

I was not the only one.

I was not alone.

The Jade Cup

Singapore International School, Lim, Warren – 12

He glanced around.

He was irrevocably lost.

John sighed. Why did misfortune always choose to befall him? And especially now, in a place where he had never traversed before.

A young and impressionable foreign exchange student, John was hiking the Huangshan mountains on his own. He had read a lot about the place – and there was, indeed, plenty for him to learn. Throughout the ages, countless poems and stories had been written extolling Huangshan's breathtaking scenery and less-than-earthly spirituality. Scientists regularly found new species of animals and dinosaur bones on its vast grounds, and many stories featuring dragons living in secret mountain caves obtained their inspiration from Huangshan. Legends even had it that living animals took on human form and supernatural beings came alive here! There was no doubt that beautiful Huangshan was a place of mystery – and he wanted to explore the place for himself.

John had taken the less travelled path and soon found himself in places that were not on the tourist trek. The Huangshan expedition was going well until his phone left his grasp and crashed into the rocky ground. He ran over and picked it up, desperately ramming the home button in vain, hoping to see a flicker of light appear on the screen. It had been his only source of direction. Without the map installed in his phone, it would be nearly impossible to find his way back.

At least the scenery was good, John wryly remarked. Sun-soaked mossy vegetation hung off the rocky mountains while lush green leaves adorned the branches of trees. White, mystical fog coated the area, penetrating into even the deepest valleys. The azure blue sky rested above, watching the rustle of the leaves below. If heaven ever was a place on earth, this must be it.

For a moment, John forgot he had lost his way. What was unfolding in front of him was unspeakable beauty and he wanted to capture its majesty in his pictures. Thrusting his hand into his blue backpack, he pulled out a camera, held it up to eye level and centred the frame on a picturesque rock. John frowned. Somehow, the view from the camera didn't match up to his expectations. Perhaps he could shift a little to the left.

Suddenly, his foot slipped. John flailed his hands around, trying to regain balance.

His efforts were in vain, and he felt himself lose his footing, falling down the stone steps. It was a long way down, and John kept tumbling, tumbling and tumbling. Until he landed at the foot of the steps, motionless.

How long he stayed on the ground, he didn't know. What woke him was a nudge on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and, staring at him, was another pair of eyes. A panda's eyes.

Now, John knew enough about China to know that pandas did not live in this region. They lived in...Sichuan, he recalled. The panda was out of place in the mountainous slopes of Huangshan. But that was the least of John's worries. The animal in front of him was not behind a fence. Would this two hundred pound piece-of-art by Mother Nature turn violent on him?

Suddenly, the panda stood up. He was expecting the worst when the mammal sprinted past him. Confused, John turned around. It was running towards a steep mountainside. But that was not all. For some unexplained reason, John could feel that the panda was beckoning him to follow. So he picked himself up and started to limp, which soon turned into a fast-paced walk, in the panda's direction. The bear was heading towards the pines not too far away.

Dense was the vegetation, and varied were the plants – and John could not see a beaten track through the thick undergrowth. But lo and behold! The earth rumbled with a thunderous noise, and the greenery started to part to each side to reveal a path. John rubbed his eyes in disbelief. Even the theme park in Disneyland couldn't produce such special effects!

As they trekked through the greenery, John could not help but glance into the cloudy sky. The peaks of Huangshan loomed in mist, as if they were illusionary. Sunlight gleamed off the lush leaves, giving the vegetation a golden appearance. Wispy clouds hung above, dragged along by the cool breeze. Such tranquillity, such beauty! If they were not in such a hurry, John would have stopped to take another picture for keepsake. But he could not, for another sight soon unfolded before him.

They arrived at an open space. Hundreds of villagers were on their knees, toasting to the sky. A robed man – clearly a Taoist priest – was standing on an elevated platform in the middle, and what he said made little sense to John: “The Dionysian Spirit has descended upon us. Let us make a joyful sound to the Immortal Exiled from Heaven,”

With this, the villagers began chanting:

“Thousands of feet high towers the Yellow Mountains
With its thirty-two magnificent peaks,
Blooming like golden lotus flowers
Amidst red crags and rock columns
Once I was on its lofty summit,
Admiring Tianmu Pine below.
The place is still traceable where the immortals
Before ascending to heaven made elixir out of jade.”

John immediately recognised those words. Were they not the inspirational writings of Li Bai, the poet who lived in the Tang dynasty and whose poems were recited by school children even till today? Li Bai indulged in drinking all his life. In “The Song of Xiangyang,” he wrote that there were thirty-six thousand days in a century, and that one should drink three hundred cups one day. From his poems and thoughts, it could be known that Li Bai had a special fondness of wine. However, instead of saying that Li Bai had a heartfelt love for liquor, it seemed to be that drinking was his negation to the tragedy of life. The “Dionysian state” which these villagers were worshipping allowed their “fallen fairy” to forget his existence, giving him courage to live.

The panda dashed towards the platform and, as it leapt into the air, the animal turned into a human! White flowing robes held in place by a black belt, a folding fan in one hand, and a scholar hat on the head. John could hardly believe his eyes. These were not hologram images. The characters were too three-dimensional for modern technology to mimic. Was he hallucinating? Maybe the vision was caused by the food he had consumed earlier. Possibly. But John was sure that he was not inebriated. He had not touched a single drop of alcohol recently.

“So you have brought a friend today, Master Li Bai?” the Taoist priest asked the apparition. Then, looking at John, he said, “Come join us, drink, and we shall celebrate the presence of the God of Poems.”

As soon as John reached the top of the platform, he was given a cup – an unblemished jade container with delicate carvings of dragon on the sides. Having seen such artefact in books and museums, John instantly knew he was holding a priceless ornament in his hands.

“Can I keep this as a memento?” John asked.

“Of course you can! You are our guest,” replied the Taoist priest, with a smile of a proud host. John promptly put the cup into his pocket.

By the time Li Bai finished his third recital, the sun had started to send out the last rays of the day, transforming the erstwhile blue skies into a canvas of orange, purple and red. Set against the mountainous terrain and the streaming clouds, the whole place was a brightly-colored Van Gogh painting hanging in the air.

“I shall never see a more beautiful scenery than this in my life,” John told his hosts, awestruck.

“You should descend the mountains before it gets dark. I am afraid nobody would fetch me at this location,” Li Bai said to John.

“Yes, indeed he should,” said the priest, before breaking into another smile...

Ring!

What was that sound? It was coming out from his pouch. Strenuously moving his limbs, John reached out to feel the object. It was his phone ringing – and it seemed like it was working again. But everything else in John’s vision was abject darkness. Then it dawned upon him that he had not opened his eyes. While he finally – and painfully – did so, he found himself lying on the ground where he had tried to take a photo hours earlier. Where were the panda, Li Bai and the Taoist priest? Was the whole experience a dream?

As John picked himself up, he felt something hard in his pocket. He put his hand in and took the object out. It was the jade cup.

Huangshan Legend – The Instrumental Fray

SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Or, Esther – 13

There are many famous tales from China's magical mountains -- Huangshan. However, why are these magical mountains named as Huangshan? It is all related to the Huang Brothers. This is the story of one of the most momentous instrumental frays in the world.

Many moons ago, there existed the Huang Brothers -- HuaXia and YanDi Huang, they lived together in a beautiful old house with a thatched roof in a village on the mountains. HuaXia was the elder brother, he studied the ancient arts of Dizi, while YanDi was the younger brother, he was highly intelligent, and he studied the antediluvian mastery of Erhu. They didn't have a peaceful life as the Mongols often create nuisances to the villages on the mountains.

One day, when YanDi was practicing Erhu, HuaXia decided to play some tricks on him, and he kept on poking YanDi's back with his Dizi.

"Stop," YanDi said, with his voice filled with agitation, and he turned and faced HuaXia.

The moment YanDi faced HuaXia, YanDi shouted, "Ware danger, brother!". HuaXia looked backwards and saw that the Mongols were beginning to run towards them, the Mongols had naked scimitars in their hands.

"Kill these two Chinese young men," the Mongol Master said to his men, "it's time for us to tell these Chinese that we're the owner of these mountains! We have to dominate China!"

YanDi saw a horse, immediately flung himself and HuaXia astride the horse who turned and galloped away. They changed the direction thrice as soon as they were out of sight of the Mongols.

"Whither are we going?" Huaxia asked, without slackening their pace.

"Let's cross that stream first," YanDi suggested, "then we can discuss our plans." Then, they crossed the stream and stopped.

"Hold tight, brother," YanDi said, and both of them slid off the horse's back and faced each other.

"Seriously, these Mongols are very disturbing," YanDi complained, "they're always irritating us innocent Chinese villagers!"

"Yes, and they even want to dominate China!" HuaXia exclaimed, "How evil!"

"For the sake of our country, let's work together to prevent the invasion of the Mongols," YanDi said and they had a talk about their plans.

The next day, they wound their way through the woods and headed to the jungle next to the garrison of the Mongols.

"Look!" YanDi said and pointed. Not many yards away, there are some battlements, and after walking for more than a minute, they came out in an open grassy space. A stream ran across it and over the stream, not as near as the battlements were to the garrison of the Mongols, there stood a short, square tower with a few windows and a silver door that faced them.

YanDi looked sharply to make sure no Mongols were in sight, they trod up as lightly and carefully as they could along the stairs, for fear of tripping over the uneven cobblestones. The tower was rather dark, there was a room in it, and a wooden staircase in the corner which led up to a door which you could get out to the battlements.

Huaxia looked at the narrow windows and gasped, “Ah!”, then he covered his mouth and pointed below, and whispered, “There are two Mongols at the entrance of the tower!”

There weren’t any good places to conceal so they quickly flung themselves into one of the bunks to hide. And just as HuaXia took his place, from somewhere on his left, three figures appeared. Never had HuaXia felt so nervous in his life, he kept on sweating and he could not stop himself from farting. PFFT! PFFT! PPPFFFFT!

“RiHan, what... What was that sound?” KangLie, one of the Mongols, asked, feeling scared.

Then they started to stare at each other and one of them shouted, “This tower smells very damp, let’s get out!” and the three Mongols walked out of the tower to the battlements.

“Phew...” HuaXia panted, “that was so close!”

“HuaXia, get ready,” YanDi said, and the two of them went out to the open grassy space. YanDi hid in the bushes, while HuaXia stood on the grassy space.

“Mongol Master, here are some gifts for you!” HuaXia shouted, held a box, and waved towards the Mongols.

The Mongol Master went out of his room, without a second thought, he answered, “Give me the presents!”

HuaXia threw the box to the Mongol Master, and yelled, “Master, there’re a lot of gifts inside the box.”

The Mongol Master grinned and told the Mongols to come out to the battlements to open the gift. But little did they know the box had nothing inside it, and when the Mongol Master opened the box, his face morphed into a furious glare and let out a howl of anger, “Argh! THERE’S NOTHING INSIDE THE BOX! GET’EM!”

The Mongols bowed and replied, in the most pompous Mongolian way, “Our most sapient master, we will.” And they walked towards HuaXia with their scimitars pointing towards him.

Then, YanDi emerged from the bushes, and shouted, “Start the symphony!” YanDi took out his Erhu and his bow stick and started playing it with a pathetic tone.

“How silly, trying to defeat us with such puny tones,” the Mongol Master chuckled.

“Oh, but not this time,” YanDi said with a cheeky voice and he played the Erhu raucously, making loud squeaky sounds. The sounds were so unpleasant that some of the Mongols fainted.

“Time for me to join in!” HuaXia shouted in a cocky manner, and he lifted his Dizi to his mouth and joined in, providing an ear-piercing accompaniment. Sound vibrations acted through the Mongols’ nervous system and gave shocks to their hearts and muscles, causing the Mongols to collapse.

Undaunted by their actions, the Mongol Master spoke a nightmarish curse in Mongolian, “Burkhan tedniig khurana tikkanshan kashlan...”, vowed to defeat them and unleashed Mongolian forces.

Suddenly in the midst of the symphony, the Mongol Master jumped off of the battlement and pointed his scimitar towards HuaXia. Fortunately, HuaXia was as quick as lightning and slid off and dug his fingers into the Mongol Master’s scalps.

“AHHHH!” the Mongol Master screamed in pain, blood was coming out from his face.

Then, the Mongol Master kicked HuaXia, took a step back, steadied himself, and yanked HuaXia again, then pushed him away. This paralysed HuaXia’s diaphragm, he gasped heavily and lied on the floor.

HuaXia stood up again and raised his left forearm, snapping the Mongol Master's neck. Then, HuaXia turned ninety degrees to the side and curled his hand into a fist and aimed at the Mongol Master's nose. His fist hit the bridge of his nose, the Mongol Master's blood dripped all over the ground.

"YanDi, start the final part of the symphony!" HuaXia shouted, "Power is draining from him!"

Using all his might, YanDi moved his bow quickly, and started making deafening and extremely irritating sounds with his Erhu, affecting both Mongol Master's mental and physical stability, which got on his nerves and drove him crazy. The Mongol Master covered his ears and kept shrieking, "Halt! Halt!"

After that, HuaXia started making nerve-wrecking and high-pitched sounds with his Dizi, physically and mentally torturing the Mongol Master, causing the Mongol Master's heart to beat amazingly fast.

"UGGHHH! I can't do it anymore!" the Mongol Master cried.

In his ultimate act, the Mongol Master smiled one last time, led out all his power towards the Huang Brothers, and before stabbing HuaXia's chest with his scimitar, the Mongol Master collapsed.

The next day, the Huang brothers brought the villagers to the garrison of the Mongols, the villagers couldn't believe their eyes when they saw the dead bodies of the Mongols and the Mongol Master. They cheered in triumph and joy that the Mongols were finally defeated, and they regarded the Huang brothers as heroes, and named the mountains where they lived after the brothers' family name -- Huang, and called it, "Huangshan". And the villagers living in Huangshan had a peaceful life afterwards. This is the greatest story of all time.

Chinese Wedding Gown

St Clare's Girls' School, Kwok, Angie – 12

In the 1880s, there was a mountain in China; there were shops and a half-built school. The mountain seemed to be different from others, but why was this mountain different from others?

The reason was that some urbanities wanted to build the mountain into a city. The people in the mountain strongly disagreed.

Some urbanities rushed to the mountain and shouted, "you can't disagree! Now we are going to burn down the whole mountain!"

"No you can't!" replied the villagers. "You cannot hurt nature!"

However, some urbanities still insisted on damaging the mountain and building it into a city. The urbanities asked their servants to burn down the whole mountain. Before long, the whole mountain was on fire.

Carmen was a common citizen in city. She was a fire-fighter and decided to save the mountain and take the sufferers to the next mountain. However, it is not easy as you might think, because the fire was too big. A half-built school fell down suddenly, so she got trapped. She told the sufferers to go away and ignore her.

The god of the mountain was moved by Carmen because in his memory, the urbanities were all bad. He decided to use his superpower to save Carmen. He decided to use his superpower to create a heavy rain and save Carmen.

Unfortunately, he was too late. Carmen cuddled her daughter Cindy in her arms and said, "I had made a Chinese wedding gown for you before. Remember, you must wear it one day." Cindy promised her mother and burst into tears.

She called her mum softly several times but there was no response – only a deadly silence. But Cindy kept saying, "Mum, I will stay with you all day. Mum, you must be tired, sleep for a more while." She knew Carmen was not asleep, so she did not let the others attempt to wake her. Perhaps if no one tried to wake up her mother, she could stay asleep. Maybe Carmen would not leave; maybe she would accompany Cindy forever.

The god of the mountain was really angry about Carmen's death so he decided to retaliate. He used his superpower to make a natural disaster. There was flooding and an earthquake. The urbanities realized their mistake and promised they would never damage the nature again.

Many years later, Cindy found a boyfriend. She put on the Chinese wedding gown that made by her mother. She was as beautiful as an immortal. The rain finally stopped; the sky became blue and a rainbow appeared. The mountain had already been restored. Cindy looked upon the sky. She seemed to think of her mother. She showed a sweet smile. Perhaps Carmen saw Cindy wearing this Chinese wedding gown from heaven.

The Journey to the North-East

St Clare's Girls' School, Kwok, Gloria – 12

It was late in the afternoon, as I walked back from the market. I saw a poster nailed on a tree. It was the poster that hung on every single year, the poster where many lives were lost, the poster where my father passed away.....

Far away, in Northern-east, the Mountain of Huang, to be exact, lived a gruesome monster, “The Undefeatable”. Not one single soul had lived to tell the tale for they either got killed or had fallen down in the deep dark chasm below the mountain. The way up to the Mountain of Huang wasn’t as easy as you might think. Upon the steep rocky path that leads up to the top of the mountain, one misstep and you would already be caught dead. Not to mention, even after you made it to the highest of the highest of the mountain, you would still have to kill the monstrous beast. From what I heard, it had claws and fangs that were so sharp that could kill you almost at once, blood even more poisonous than then the most venomous creature on earth.

Ever since I was a little child, I already had a wild soul of wanting to slay monsters and now wanted to follow in my father’s footsteps more than ever. I planned to set foot on the most dangerous journey: The Mountain of Huang.

“Mother, I plan to take a journey to the Mountain of Huang and defeat ‘The Undefeatable’,” I told my mother, who had been ill since father passed away.

“My child, defeating ‘The Undefeatable’ isn’t as easy as you think...” sighed Mother. “Remember what it did to your dear poor father...? It was the most dreadful moment of my life...”

“Mother, I promise you, I will not make the same mistakes father did on his journey. I will slay the monster for the kingdom and you,” I said with a proud look on my face.

“If you insist on going, I can’t stop you...but please, do be careful, I can’t bear losing another of my loved ones...” said Mother with a worried expression on her face.

The journey began early in the morning as I grabbed my trusty bow & arrow and walked out of my home, my village, and then my kingdom. I took a deep breath and started walking to the north-east. I crossed rivers, walked over bridges, strolled through a forest. Everything seemed normal, but as I came closer to the Mountain of Huang, the air seemed to have shifted and densified. The smell of danger was coming nearer and nearer. Although I knew danger was coming, I couldn’t help but glance at the view of the mountain. It started off with reddish-brown from the bottom, then greyish black in the middle and snowy-white at the tip of the mountain. With clouds obscuring the top, it seemed so spiritual. As the sun was sinking to the horizon, I arrived at the base of the mountain where I laid down on the moist grass and fell asleep moments later.

Opening my eyes, I found another pair of eyes staring at me, a man. I started and asked who he was, and he told me that he was a man who lived upon the ranges of the mountains and had seen many soldiers try and fail to kill “The Undefeatable.” But he said that there was something in me that made me the one. He gave me a towel and told me, “Pain is just an illusionary sensation.” I was puzzled but I thanked him, grabbed my bag and started the hiking upon the steepest path I have ever set foot on. Every once and a while I would hear rocks trundling down and falling down in the dark pit. Every step I took should be considered twice -- one careless step and I would fall straight down the pit, never to be seen again. One of my hand suddenly slipped off a rock. I fretted, lost my balance and for a moment started to fall backwards. But in that glimpse of a second, I managed to quickly grab another rock and pulled myself upwards again. My heart was beating so fast that it seemed as if it was going to pop out. I assured myself that everything was all right now and reminded myself to also not fret but stay calm at all circumstances.

Within a few more steps I would reach the top of the Mountain, I sensed that the suspense was getting larger. There was fog everywhere and I could hear the beating of my heart growing louder and louder. I was trembling, my hands shaking, not because of the cold but of the terror inside of me. I put myself together and continued to walk conscientiously.....

“The Undefeatable” was even more terrifying than had ever been described. It had fur as white as snow, four eyes, two horns, scales all over itself, and a snake as a tail. Even before I could react, it ran towards me and tried to pounce on me. I tried to stab its eyes but I missed, I shot an arrow and hit its neck. It started bleeding; it raged and howled, possibly in pain. I shot another arrow. This time it hit one of the beast’s eyes. It began to growl, at first I thought that it was so in pain, it was going to drop dead anytime. But no, its wound started to heal. My mouth dropped. It looked as if it was grinning and charged at me with his horns. It knocked right my ribcage and I gave out a cry. It then used its tail to flick at me, where it hit my head. I instantly fell unconscious.

“Pain is just an illusory sensation” this phrase, said by the wise man, came to my mind, and I suddenly became conscious. I finally understood what he meant. I got out the large towel he had given me, and when I said, “Mountain of Huang, the Undefeatable, it immediately turned into an invisible cape. “Woah” I exclaimed, but before I could say anything again, the beast was already ready for round two, I put on the cape, and instantly became invisible. The beast looked puzzled. I shot the last arrow that I had, hoping that it would directly hit its heart. “Thunk! ” . It was like slow motion, as I watched the arrow hit the beast’s heart, blood was dripping out from its heart, it howled so loudly that the range of noise surely traveled miles away.

After making sure “The Undefeatable” was finally defeated, I cut off one of its horns and went back to my kingdom, I presented the horn to the Emperor. He was delighted, he asked me what I wanted,

“Congratulations on killing ‘The Undefeatable’! As promised, you will be rewarded with anything you want: Gold? Money? Horses?” asked the Emperor.

“The best doctor in the kingdom will do,” I said.

“Are you sure? You could have wealth or fame but you choose to have a doctor?” exclaimed the Emperor.

“My King, my mother is in a state of melancholy, and only with the help of the best doctor in the kingdom can she be cured. She won’t be sad for the rest of her life,” I said.

“Very well, young man, your request shall be granted, I will ask for the best doctor in the kingdom,” said the Emperor.

And so, the Emperor indeed did find the best doctor in the kingdom and helped recover the state of my mother. From now on, no more men would have to risk themselves to go up to the Mountain of Huang.

The Immortal Rock

St Clare's Girls' School, Leung, Katie – 12

“Go with your friend Ang to the mountains far above and find the ‘immortal pointing the way rock’. It’ll be able to provide you with the help you need.” a faint female voice echoed.

~

A whimper left her mouth, a cry for help before her head was severed off. Watching as her head fell onto the floor with a ‘thump’, he opened his mouth to scream, to grieve for his mother and took a step forward but was stopped by steady hands covering his mouth, causing him to stumble a bit. He turned his head expecting the person to stop him to be a soldier, ready for him to meet the same fates as his mother, only to lock eyes with his best friend Ang.

Chaos endured around them, flames destroyed huts that were once safe havens for people, now becoming nothing but piles of ash. Shrieks and screams fill the air, smoke fogged the air, making the place look like a battlefield. Perhaps it is one, a battlefield to fight against freedom. One look back at what used to be his mother, a soft streak of blood trailing down the floor, he ran.

His friend dashed after him, running to the rocky mountains because their lives depended on it. As they closed in on the mountains a soldier noticed them and began chasing and cursing at them. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Ang being captured by the soldier. A sword raised up high into the sky and sliced through his head.

“No!” He cried out, watching the life drain out of those pair of eyes. He fell on his knees, sobs wrecking him.
“No...”

~

Li woke up, gasping and panting while sweat beaded his forehead. He sat up in the darkness, trying to regain his rigged breathing. His eyes started to focus on the dark cave he was staying in, the drawings and shapes carved into the stone walls slowing taking their shape. As he began to calm down himself from his nightmare, he noticed a figure sitting outside the cave, curled up into a ball. He got up from his bed, which was only a piece of fabric that they managed to steal from the camp before taking refuge in the mountains, to the shadows side, overlooking the midnight sky.

“That nightmare again?” Ang whispered.

Li nodded, unsure of how to respond properly. The same nightmare haunted him every night, all beginning with his mother’s death, ending in his friend’s imaginary death, and leaving him in a cold sweat in the morning. ‘Survivor’s guilt’, as people call it. Even the land of reality was better than the imaginary world, where nightmares always taunted him about his mother’s death.

“Have you ever thought of what could happen, if we weren’t captured into that camp?” Ang asked, after a while, still gazing at the snow-covered mountain. “We wouldn’t be here like this, trying to find your ‘immortal rock’, we would be at home safe and asleep. We would be free, able to do what we want.” His voice seemed like miles away, dreaming of a place where maybe they wouldn’t be so messed up.

“I’m sorry Ang, for dragging you into my mess.” Li breathed out after a while, guilty for involving Ang in his plot of seeking revenge on everything life has tossed him.

“It’s fine really. As long as I’m able to be with you, it’s fine.”

They sat together in comfortable silence, the full moon in the velvet sky casting a silver glow onto the two boys. Hundreds and thousands of glittering stars fill the violet canvas of the sky, painting a picture right in front of their eyes. Waves and tides of clouds swam over the small mountains, covering the terrors below and hovering above them. Looking down onto the fluffy mass of mist, it looked like a dream. Once they fall, the rolling clouds would wrap them in their mighty arms. Perhaps that was part of its plan, luring people in enough to fall into the hell of horrors where Li and Ang came from, a direct contrast they would say, the difference between heaven and hell. White snow decorated the tip of the rocky mountains, giving the scene an elegant and artistic flair.

Those who ever visited the mountains always complimented the scenery, always saying that they were breathtaking, saying that they felt like they were somewhere in heaven, with the misty sea clouds and surrounded by ancient trees. And indeed, they weren't exaggerating. Living in the clouds, every burden dulled, every problem seemed to be solved. It gave Li a sense of confirmation. Confirmation that everything was going to be alright, that someday, he was going to be freed from all the sorrow, freed from the baggage on his shoulder, freed from all the guilty thoughts on abandoning everything in his camp, his mother, and his responsibility.

As time passed on, the sky was not an exception to changing. Violet shifted into a light orange, the moon making way for the glorious sun to shine. Yellow rays spiled their paint onto the sky, casting a pinkish glow onto the clouds below. Slowly, the ball of the sun emerged from the mountains, creeping out from its deep slumber.

That's when they spotted it. An oddly shaped dot perched on one of the rocks from miles away. They could barely see the full image, but even still, they were quite certain about it. After almost a month of scouting on the mountains, searching for revenge for murdering his mother, they finally found it, 'immortal pointing the way' as his mother had said. His help has finally arrived.

Legends say that this rock would show the guidance that you needed, and Li was ready to do anything in his power to avenge his mother's death, and his childhood being robbed by those soldiers.

Li's and Ang's families were captured by soldiers along with other villagers when he and Ang were around the age of five. Ever since then, they have been locked up and trapped in a camp with soldier's eyes monitoring everyone and everywhere. It's been five years since this happened, and everyone was sick and tired of this. Li's mother hatched a plan to rebel against the soldiers, however, during the time of the rebellion, someone had snitched on them and betrayed them by telling the authorities who overpowered them. As the head of the rebellion, Li's mother was executed, leaving Li broken. Li only managed to escape the soldier's wrath because of Ang.

Haunted by his mother's request to find the rock, Li wanted to seek revenge on the soldiers. Blinded by his own ambition, he began to hunt for this rock. There was no stopping Li now that he found it.

Ang stood up, understanding Li's wish, brushed away dirt, and locked eyes with Li.

"Let's go." Li answered Ang with a smirk, his eyes glittered with determination. "Let's go and destroy those soldiers."

The Four Mountains

St Clare's Girls' School, Luk, Janice – 12

Each mountain in China is different.

There is the Mountain of Faith, the Mountain of Hope, the Mountain of Trust and the key mountain... the Mountain of Love.

These four mountains are used to let people remember that faith, hope, trust and love exist. The names of the mountains were named by four people: Lucy, her bodyguards, Dex, and Jelly, and Lucy's daughter Hope.

The Mountain of Faith was named after Lucy. Lucy was once a queen of a mysterious island named "Uvan" and she had a daughter named Hope.

One day they got raided by a heartless man named Artic. Artic and his men came to Uvan and started attacking the villagers that lived there, robbing them. As the queen of Uvan, Lucy sent her best soldiers to attack Artic, while the weaker soldiers remained to protect the villagers while they escaped.

Lucy knew that even her strongest soldiers couldn't hold Artic and his men back, so she decided to fight Artic herself. She gave Hope her cape and said her last goodbye to her daughter, asked her bodyguards to keep the girl safe no matter what happened and told them they must sacrifice their lives to protect Hope.

At that time Hope was still just a 10 year old girl. She refused to leave her mother, but there was no choice; she had to. Her mother never returned.

After some time, when Hope was 18 years old, following years of studying about Artic, she decided to fight him herself, being brave like her mother.

However, Dex, Lucy's bodyguard who had once sworn to protect Hope, said "Your highness, your mother sacrificed her life to protect you" -- he thought for a while -- "to protect us from Artic. Even the strongest and best soldiers can't hold him back. I advise you not to."

"Why didn't you go and protect mom?" Hope interrupted him. "You're her bodyguard so why didn't you protect her?! It was your job!!" A tear dripped down her face, and then Hope started crying. Dex comforted her and agreed to go and fight Artic with her.

At the same time, Dex was in a relationship with Jelly, Hope's other bodyguard. Jelly was confused about why Hope wanted to attack Artic. "It's been 8 years since Artic ever kill anyone, why are you doing this now?"

But Hope replied: "I want revenge and if you want you can come" Jelly was Hope's best friend as well as being Dex's lover. In all these years she had never seen Hope so serious. She thought that maybe it was a prank, as Hope often played pranks on them, so she decided to play along.

After a long walk and much climbing, they finally reached to Artic's palace. It was comprised of four huge mountains! They found Artic wearing gigantic armour and sitting alone there. They were confused but brave. They went down and fought him. They fought Artic until he died.

And so Hope named one of the mountains as Faith and one as Hope. Hope decided to let Dex and Jelly to name the other two mountains. Jelly named hers Trust as she trusted Hope so much that she ended up fighting Artic. Dex named "his" mountain Love, as he loved his job and loved Jelly, and that is the tale of China's mountains.

The Mountain of New Beginnings

St Clare's Girls' School, Ng, Elly – 12

The moment I opened my eyes, I looked around and realised a few things: I was not in the orphanage anymore. I was wearing a blue shirt that had a red and black symbol shaped like a blade, and some black jeans. I also noticed that the wound that I had on my leg was all bandaged up.

I looked around and tried to get out of bed but yelped in pain as soon as I moved my leg. I then proceeded to take a look at my leg and saw my ankle wrapped with bandages and was set with a piece of bamboo.

An old man came into the room said, “glad to see that you’re finally awake, given the state you were in when we found you, Marie.”

Looking at me was an old man who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with some floral patterns on it. He wore some blue shorts and had short hair. He had a kind smile and hazel brown eyes.

“Huh, how do you know my name? Where am I and who are you?”

A bunch of questions filled my mind as I rambled on.

“Slow down now, little girl. You are exhausting yourself. Now let me introduce myself. My name is Master Chi, and I am the master and the protector of the magical mountain otherwise known as Huangshan. You and your friend Sam were unconscious when my people found you both in the forest, so we brought you here.”

I was filled with worries the moment he said the word ‘Sam’. If anything had happened to her, I would never forgive myself. She was my only friend in the orphanage. I had met her when I was 8 and that was the best thing that ever happened to me. She has been with me through thick and thin, and now we were 16.

Master Chi saw me tremble and tearing up and said “Don’t worry your friend is doing fine — and explained everything that happened to us. Now lie still, I need to remove your bandages so I can preform the incantation.’

As soon as he said that he pressed his hand against my head as he muttered something, I felt a power surging through my body, and a tingling in the process. It felt sensational, my leg no longer felt like a burden to me, it felt good.

When the incantation was finished, Master Chi told me to try and walk, I slowly got of the bed and started walking around.

“Well, are you feeling better now?” asked Master Chi.

“Better? I’m feeling amazing! I can run a whole marathon! How did you do that?” I asked, with a big smile on my face.

“Well, have you heard of the myth of the magical mountain?” asked Master Chi.

“Uhh I heard some things about it. If I remember correctly, centuries ago the the gods made a promise that no immortal being and mortal could have children or any love affairs, so that no mortal would die because of their selfish reasons. Despite all that, there was a goddess and a man named Glen who fell in love and soon had twins, more specifically demigods. The gods were furious, and as punishment to the four — turned the man into the sun, the goddess into the moon and banished the children to this mountain, so that they could not step a foot off the mountain,” I replied.

Master Chi nodded in response and said, “There’s more though, even if the parents were transformed into different forms, they still cared for their children from a distance. The father not only gave the mountain warmth and light, but the entire world, while the mother used the last of her powers as a goddess to protect the mountain. Some of the gods pitied the children so they combined a part of their powers and created the ‘pathway’. The pathway searches for those in need or those who have lost their families, then leads them here where they can begin a new life, a new start.”

I immediately knew what he was talking about and simply nodded in return: a new life, a new start.....

Even though I had only met Master Chi for a short period of time, this felt like home. This could be a new chance at life. I sat in silence trying to process what he had said.

Suddenly the doors opened and Sam burst through the door. Sam had tanned skin, curly dark brown hair, a pair of brown eyes, black glasses and she was wearing an orange shirt and blue jeans. She has the nicest personality and is always curious about everything. She has been dreaming about being a singer since forever, and she has an amazing singing voice. I could not agree more when she said that. I could never ask for another best friend.

She glared at me with her famous death stare that scared the living hell out of me, then pulled me into a hug and started bawling her eyes out.

“You scared the hell out of me girl! You were unconscious for three days. DON’T YOU EVER SCARE ME LIKE THAT AGAIN!! Do you hear me?”

I sarcastically grinned and said, “yes mother, I will never do that again.”

We then left the room to get lunch and it was freakishly good. They had magical plates and cups that could magically make food from thin air. All you had to do was say what you wanted. I got a beef taco with a glass of apple juice, while Sam got a club sandwich with a glass of avocado smoothie.

After lunch, I got to explore the place. I first met up with Sam and saw her talking to a boy. She then introduced me to Carson. He had blue eyes and brown hair and was wearing a grey polo shirt and blue shorts. He had a lot of interest in the music department and was really nice. I stayed for a while and realised that Sam and Carson were blushing hard. So I decided to leave them alone for a while and headed out to explore the mountain myself.

I saw a small path near the temple and started following it. It was like a maze and I ended up getting lost and walked for hours not knowing what direction to take until I accidentally bumped into someone, I looked up and started apologising, until I heard a laugh.

The boy helped me up and said, “It’s fine you don’t have to apologise, my name is Damian and you are..?”

“Oh, my name is Marie. Sorry I’m new here, I got lost and... yeah.”

Damian had sea green eyes that you could get lost in, messy blonde hair, tanned skin, he wore a black T-shirt, and blue jeans.

“Don’t worry, I got lost here a lot when I first got here. It’s not a big deal, just takes some time to get used to the path. Not many people come here though, so you’re lucky that you bumped into me. Otherwise, you might be lost for days,” he said with a small smile on his face.

“That’s bad... anyway can you show me around since you seem to know this place like the back of your hand?

“Sure, but I want to show you something first, if you don’t mind of course.”

I laughed and he asked me to close my eyes, he then led me somewhere and told me to open them. I did as he said and saw the the most beautiful view of the mountains. The beauty was all perfect. The way that the light reflected on the water felt so magical. The plants seemed to dance in the wind, like water.

“Beautiful isn’t it... just like you.”, said a voice from behind me.

I turned around and smiled at him as I finally knew my choice.

We had a wonderful conversation as we talked all about the scenery. It was so pleasant. The air felt fresh; the plants and flowers smelled amazing. It just seemed perfect. After hours of talking, Damian led the way back to the temple.

As soon as we got back, I ran to Sam and told her all about my conversation with Master Chi. She smiled and we both went to find Master Chi.

The next day, they welcomed us with open arms as we joined them – the mountain of new beginnings.

Who Lives in the Tiny Village above the Clouds

St Francis Xavier's College, Lau, Marcus – 13

Huang Shan mountain is a beautiful but mysterious place. Clouds isolate the top from the bottom, strange trees and rocks and even mysterious fogs at valleys.

A secret village above the clouds, and something or someone lives there. Many people followed the legend and tried to find it, not many succeeded. When I was a boy, my uncle told me the stories about the mysterious village, he always said I would be the one to find it. Years later, I became an expert hiker where I forgot my uncle's stories.

One day, my uncle suddenly felt sick. I rushed to the hospital and saw him lying on the bed. He made me promise that I would go to the secret village. He said he went there before, and there was a tool that could heal the earth from global warming. I had more questions, but he already died.

One day I received a call that my uncle was on his death bed. Worried, I rushed to the hospital and his last dying wish was for me to finish what he started – go to the secret village of Huang Shan and save the world, there is a secret tool. As I asked him how there was no response, he died. ★

In the weeks to come I planned my adventure. Of course, no one should go on a quest without companions. I called Tim and Martha, telling them that we were going on a quest. Luckily, they agreed. We packed our gear and met up at the airport.

We arrived at the Huangshan hotel 12 hours later. Exhausted, we all hit the hay to rest for our epic adventure, which begins tomorrow.

The next morning, I rendezvoused with my friends at the hotel lobby and we immediately started our hike since our return flight leaves in 3 days.

After 6 hours, we arrived at the 'Welcoming Pine'. A strange tree which looked like a person who stretches out one arm to welcome guests from afar, the other hand is elegantly inserted in the pocket of his trousers.

However, something strange happened. The 'Welcoming Pine' moved, its arm pointed at me and the leaves did a come-over-here pose.

'Did you see the tree move?' I asked my friends.

'Not at all.' replied Tim.

'I saw nothing either, it's just a tree.' said Martha.

How could this be possible? A tree that moves? I tried several times to prove I wasn't seeing things. I walked towards the tree.

'Hello, traveler.' it said. 'What can I do for you?' I asked about the secret village and my uncle's dying wish. The tree said it never heard of such a tool. However, it whispered to me that the village has many secrets. It conjured up a map. Then it froze in place.

I walked back to my friends. 'What's that in your hand?' asked Martha. I showed the map to them. They gasped. 'So, the tree did move, and it called for you?' asked Martha. 'Yep.' I replied.

For the next hour, we followed the path on the map. Although the first hour was easy, the following weren't.

'What's this?' asked Tim. 'What's troll town?' I took a look at the map, my face covered with shock. It definitely said troll town.

'What do we do?' asked Martha. 'We split up. There are two paths, right?' I said, still trembling. 'Me and Martha take the path on the right. Tim, you take the left.'

‘Grrrr! I am so hungry; I hate eating trees! All that rabbit food! I miss those tasty humans! Haven’t eaten them for ages!’

‘A troll?’ asked Martha. ‘Yeah definitely. And above us too.’ I replied. And then I saw one. The trolls were huge and tall, they had hair all over their body, not to mention rotten teeth and clothes. We walked quietly against the wall. Suddenly, I heard Tim scream. The trolls must have captured him.

We ran quickly. Hoping not to be found. Luckily, I snatched the map from Tim earlier. So, I didn’t have to worry about getting lost.

‘We’re running?’ screamed Martha. ‘Your best friend just got captured!’

‘There’s nothing we can do, Martha.’ I replied.

‘Nothing we can do? We could just sneak in and RESCUE him!’

‘HOW?’ I could no longer control my temper. ‘There are at least a thousand trolls up there! 2 humans against an army of trolls? Are you crazy?’ ‘I said sneak in and rescue them, not fight!’ sighed Martha.

‘I know! But what are the odds of being killed? Sometimes you’ve got to think before you act, Martha!’

However, Martha didn’t listen to me and sped off.

I shouted Martha’s name but no one answered. It was getting dark. She was missing for an hour.

I sat down on a rock with an enormous guilt. I talked to the map once again. Suddenly something magical happened. A golden arrow appeared on the map, it pointed at troll town. ‘I know, but how do I get in?’ I asked the map. The map now enlarged itself, revealing a direct route into the heart of troll town.

I acted immediately and looked for the secret passage. Within 15 minutes I arrived at the entrance, there was a wooden door on the rocky wall. I quietly pushed the door open and found myself at the heart of troll town.

Martha and Tim were there and both tied up next to a large pot of soup.

Despite feeling guilt for my weakness, I was happy seeing them. It was not the time to celebrate. I untied them instantly. ‘Took you long enough.’ said Tim. ‘How did you get here?’ asked Martha.

‘I’ll explain later, long story.’

We ran as fast as we could and hid in the cave until we were assured that it was safe to leave.

We started our hike again the next morning and arrived at our destination, the entrance of the secret village. It was an enormous rock wall with a door symmetrically placed in the middle. I walked through the door with ease. However, my friends couldn’t, it was like an invisible barrier blocked them.

‘No use! We can’t get through!’ ‘Good luck’ they shouted.

The map led to ‘*The Path of Frozen Shivers*’. It looked as an impossibly steep stone staircase, just looking at it made me shiver!

After climbing for hours, I finally arrived at ‘*Golden gate*’ per the map. As I opened it a flash of light blinded me! I found myself standing on the clouds.

‘Hello traveler.’

Fear coursing through my veins I turn around.

‘So, you have arrived.’ said an old man wearing a long robe and ancient hat with a bow. ‘We’ve been expecting you.’

‘Who’s we?’ I asked.

Before he could reply more people came out of the houses clapping and cheering.

‘Follow me.’ said the old man. I followed him into this oddly shaped shrine. We entered a magical elevator and exited on the top floor. The huge pillar lined room was lined with 9 wooden chairs each with someone. The old man walked slowly and took the center seat.

The old man introduced himself as Lao-zhi, the chairman of the Ancient Wizard Council. I was thrilled to meet real wizards. They asked me about my journey and I told them everything.

‘Well,’ said the wizard. ‘It seems like you’ve passed the tests. Do you mind telling us why you’re here?’

I told them about my uncle’s dying wish.

‘Yes,’ said the wizard. ‘There was a visitor a few decades ago name Li. I assume he was your uncle?’

‘Yes.’

Unfortunately, Lao-zhi said there was no such tool. He said my uncle could be referring to the ‘*Earth tree*’, but it has been hibernating for 20 years and only the chosen one would be able to wake it up.

I asked Lao-zhi to take me to the ‘Earth tree’.

We arrived at the Earth tree, which was grey in color stood lifeless. As I peered through the roots, I could see the people of the world.

‘Hope is what revives the tree,’ I said.

‘However, greedy people from developed countries erode the hope of the rest.’

‘I see,’ smiled the wizard. ‘Now, touch the tree.’

As I touched the tree its color changed to a rich brown, it spread its leaves as they grew green.

The tree, happy to be woken, offered me a chance to fulfil my deepest desire. Without hesitation, I said it.

Suddenly, as a huge jet of blue light shot out of the tree and lit the entire atmosphere, I knew at that moment the greenhouse gases were destroyed.

‘The world is saved,’ said the Lao-zhi. ‘Thanks to you. Humanity owes you, but you can never speak of this.’

Lao-zhi said goodbye, and seconds later I was with Tim & Martha at the hotel.

The Legends of the Village of Dreams

St Joseph's College, Lam, Wai Yue – 13

Have you ever had dreams? Good dreams? Or nightmares? These are controlled by the residents of the Village of Dreams way up high, hidden on Yellow Mountain, where dragons roam, magic is used and practiced, and dreams will always come true.

Lee had heard of this place and made it his destiny to find out once and for all if it existed. Joined by his friends, Wong and Chan, they set off for the mythical mountain without a doubt in their minds. All three of them knew about how two famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on this mountain and never returned. Countless others underwent the same fate and mysteriously disappeared. Lee had the feeling that they were walking into the throat of a large beast. He shuddered, goosebumps forming on his skin.

Four months later, they had explored the entire mountain, without any discoveries. Lee was devastated. His childhood dreams were crushed, but his ego would not let him give up. He tried again and again. Despite being penniless and jobless, he ignored all warnings of his family, his friends and his advisors. Wong and Chan visited Lee, trying to persuade him to get a job and settle down. Instead, they let Lee convince them to join him on one last climb up Yellow Mountain.

They set off the next day, heading up the north side, forcing their way up step by step. Soon, they came across a ravine that they had discovered on their second climb, which they named, the Ravine of Death. A good name too, since there were countless carcasses and bones lying everywhere, with crows and vultures pecking at them. Edging their way along, they slowly crossed the ravine. Lee was impatient and sped up the pace. This was when disaster struck: a boulder, barely hanging onto the cliff face, fell. It tumbled towards the trio, knocking Lee and Wong into the ravine, with Chan falling opposite to them. The last thing Lee remembered was the sound of his bones breaking.

Lee slowly opened his eyes. His body felt stiff. A blurry figure was looking at him. As his vision cleared, his heart swelled, for it was Du Fu, the legendary poet himself, who was looking after him. Beside him stood Li Bai, a huge smile on his face.

‘Where am I?’ Lee asked, although he already knew the answer.

‘You are in the Village of Dreams, my young friend,’ Du Fu replied. ‘I feared you would never wake up.’

Lee suddenly sat up, ‘Where is Wong?’ he asked desperately, fearing the worst.

‘Do not fear. Your friend is alive and well. He survived, thanks to you. You broke his fall,’ replied Li Bai, with obvious happiness.

‘Lee!’ A concerned voice drifted in. Lee perked up, all his tiredness and stiffness gone. He literally jumped from his bed and ran outside to see his best friend.

What he saw beat the time he scored full marks on the hardest test of the year. He saw the legends of the past: every emperor and leader who pleased their subjects and protected their people; every general who made a difference in the tide of war; every scholar who used their knowledge to make life better for others. Everyone who pleased this heavenly village, through five thousand years of history, was present.

Lee and Wong spent months living in this heavenly village, never aging nor dying, but things were about to change.

One day, a blast of concentrated magical energy smashed onto the village, sending shrapnel flying everywhere. Lee and Wong ran out of their houses, desperate to see what was causing the commotion. What they saw made their jaws drop: people were fighting using magic, elements, illusions, and killer beams, like something out of a Marvel movie. Dragons were flying through the air – it was a free-for-all. Li Bai came rocketing past and yelled ‘Quick! Do something! Try whatever idea you have, we are losing!’

Lee quickly reacted, copying what the others were doing. He held out his hands in front of his body, imagining a blast of energy coming right out of them, and with a whoosh, a concentrated ball of energy came flying out, on a collision course with a figure dressed in black. He sensed the incoming danger, turned around, and the ball of energy hit him right in the face. The figure froze, his movements becoming static, and soon, his body began to dissolve away.

Upon seeing this, the other figures in black panicked and retreated, while two more intruders were destroyed by the residents of the Village of Dreams.

After the battle, Li Bai and Du Fu led Lee and Wong to a small building labelled The Coming of Evil. Inside was a stone block with words chiseled into it. The words ran:

Death is upon us, pain has arrived.
Darkness has grown, evil has thrived.
The fate of our village resides in a child,
But teach him quickly, his powers are mild.

He will have to push aside,
The fear that he conceals inside.
One of the Three that came will go,
The fate of our village depends on so.

Satan is ready, his dark army raised,
His intentions are simple, our village will blaze.
Gather your forces and follow the young,
His glory will be praised, his glory will be sung.

This is the day, fate decides all,
The dead are quiet, the wounded will call.
Until the demise of Satan, we must not rest,
So pray that the child will be at his best.

‘What does it mean?’ Lee asked.

‘That you are the chosen one. You shall lead us through this war with the Village of Nightmares,’ Li Bai replied.

Lee did not answer. He was too distracted by the line that depicted his death, or the death of Wong or Chan.

For days afterwards, Lee and Wong trained under Li Bai and Du Fu, learning how to harness energy from the mountain itself. As expected, Lee learned faster than Wong, although the whereabouts of Chan was still a mystery.

Finally, they were ready for the invasion of the Village of Nightmares. Using their new powers, they flew towards their target.

What they saw amazed them: the village, like a castle of nightmares, was heavily defended by flying troops, with an army ready to attack.

'They have been busy,' Li Bai said, concerned.

'Yes, but we cannot turn back now,' said Du Fu gravely.

Lee was scared out of his wits, but he had to try. They fought through the ranks of the enemy, with Lee and Wong fighting side by side, defending each other, when a particularly powerful foe appeared. Lee and Wong were ready to fight, but instead of attacking them, their foe pulled off his mask, to reveal the face of...

'Chan,' said Lee, with tears in his eyes.

'Quick! If you want to win, follow me, Satan is this way!' Chan said urgently. Lee and Wong followed without hesitation, only to walk into a trap.

'Chan! Why?' Lee called out. 'We used to be friends!'

'I am sorry,' Chan replied, 'I am forced to do so.'

Satan appeared, and let out an evil laugh.

'MWAHAHA! I knew you would fall for this! You trusted your friend, but he betrayed you,' Satan bellowed with merriment, 'and now you will DIE!'

'No, you don't! Chan cried. 'Lee, Wong, quick! Here's the key!' Chan tossed a large, red, rusty key, enchanted with magic, into the cell.

'Why you little..., 'Satan roared. 'I will destroy you all!'

The three attacked, circling and blasting Satan, but Satan swatted them away like flies.

'You are no match for me!' Satan laughed. 'I am SATAN!' Satan let loose a deadly blast, which would surely kill them.

Chan pushed Lee and Wong out of the way and let the beam envelope him.

'No!' Lee cried.

Satan merely laughed, 'Worthless sacrifice! You are still no match for me!'

'No, but we are!'

Lee turned around and saw the entire army of the Village of Dreams standing behind him.

Satan roared. He could only watch as together, the army of the Village of Dreams released a massive blast, destroying Satan in one hit.

'It is over,' Li Bai sighed. 'But we have lost many.'

Without a word, they left, never to return.

But something was still alive...

The Dragon's Pearl

St Joseph's College, Leung, Ka Chai Louie – 12

I was starting to regret bringing my son here.

He had insisted on coming because he said he was 'as strong as the Hulk' and he wouldn't stop whining about going to Huangshan after seeing several videos of it on YouTube. I couldn't blame him. The place was stunning.

What we had failed to realize, though, was there were *excruciatingly long* sets of stairs and a long, barren road that lay between us and Guangming Ding. Timmy was already wheezing and hugging his chest after the first two hours of our hike and demanded to be picked up before he recovered enough to walk again. I tried to pick him up and wondered how long it had been since I had last done this. God, he had gotten heavy for a 7-year-old. Despite this, I gritted my teeth and kept going.

This began a maddening cycle of being picked up, demanding to be put down and whining to be picked up again, for literally 5 hours. After dawn, I just couldn't stand it. I set Timmy down and breathlessly tried to point at the tent in my backpack, hoping he would get the message.

He nodded and searched for a safe spot to camp.

We could technically have rented tent space at a checkpoint with actual human facilities, but we wanted to do the outdoors thing. After a while, I found a cave, lit a lantern, set up the tent and collapsed on my mattress. Timmy insisted on exploring the cave. I didn't even know where he got the energy, but as it was, he went off with our only light source, leaving me in the dark.

Several minutes later, I heard an excited shriek and quick footsteps coming my way. I got up groggily from my sleep and peered at Timmy's excited face, illuminated by the flickering light of the gas lamp. 'You gotta see this!' he cried enthusiastically. I got up slowly and followed his silhouette as he skipped away.

After a while, my son gestured at something shiny. I rubbed my eyes. The world came into focus. We were looking at a yellow-white orb, as large as my palm. I doubted I could hold it with one hand. What was a pearl doing in a cave where the only seas were made of mist and vapor? I looked closer and noticed something strange. The orb was semi-transparent. There were cloudlike patterns in it, moving to and fro inside. There were shapes that resembled mountains, and the clouds were moving like – oh! They resembled the 'cloud seas' that appeared during the sunrise and sunset of Huangshan. The whole orb was glowing. Perhaps it was my innate instinct or gut, but I knew this orb was no natural formation. I thought about the Chinese stories of old, and the spheres of enchanted jade Chinese dragons that could grant you any wish.

'Oh my god,' I couldn't help whispering. 'If I'm correct, this could be the most valuable thing in the world.'

Timmy stared at me with wide eyes. 'What?'

I looked at him seriously. 'This is a dragon's jade.'

I'd told him about these stories before, so he knew exactly what it was and what it could do. He tackled it and held it in both his arms, muttering something I could hardly make out..

Nothing happened for a good few seconds.

If you don't know, Chinese dragons are quite different from the ones you see in those Western fairy tales. They are wingless, yet they can fly; they look fiery, yet they control water; they are creatures of good, yet they can be unexplainably angry if you do something they don't like.

I knew the first two facts. The third was from personal experience.

Where do you find a primordial Chinese celestial dragon, you ask? It's easy. Just mess around with its pearl for a while and it'll show up.

That's exactly what happened to us.

The dragon rose from the earth, glaring at us with brilliant blue eyes that shone through the storm. It moved soundlessly and ruthlessly; it made not so much as a growl as it flew majestically and purposefully towards us which made the mountains groan with pressure. Several mountains fell, and ours was shaking so much and dropping so much debris you could hardly make out what was going on. Nevertheless, the dragon stared at Timmy with its dazzling blue eyes. Suddenly, all the rocks froze. The dragon didn't speak, but its voice reverberated through my mind, loud and clear: ***Quit your foolish meddling, mortal child. Humans are not worthy of using a dragon's pearl.***

Timmy shouted back through the storm, wind, debris and crushing rocks, 'Never! It's mine now! I'll use it for whatever I want.' He shook the jade violently. 'Kill the dragon! I command you!'

Nothing happened for a moment. Then the dragon sneered. ***A dragon's pearl is not able to harm its master even if it is snatched by other hands.***

'Timmy,' I cried. 'Please stop. It's not yours. Give it back before the dragon destroys us.'

My son looked at me. 'Why should I do that? I have infinite power in my hands. Do you think I will be stopped by a flying snake with legs?'

That offended the dragon. It narrowed its eyes and lunged for the pearl in Timmy's hands. Timmy dodged and weaved, barely dodging the dragon. The pearl seemed to tug towards the dragon's front talon ever so slightly, but Timmy held it back.

'Timmy, please! You shouldn't misuse power just because you have it. Nor should you take other's possessions. Please, please stop,' I yelled in desperation.

Timmy hesitated for a second. Just like that, the dragon snatched its pearl out of Timmy's hands. With a triumphant smirk, it said, ***Watch, foolish mortal, as I use the very thing you stole to destroy you once and for all.***

Timmy whimpered and fell to his knees, which was hard because the ground was pretty much collapsing under itself. I cried, 'He's just a child! Please forgive him. He doesn't know what he's doing.'

The dragon considered this for a moment. Then its eyes softened. It muttered something under its breath, and everything stabilized. I sighed with relief. Huangshan was safe. The dragon looked at us, with caution in its eyes. As normal, it did not speak, but I could feel it was sending me a message.

Suddenly, the dragon disappeared. Everything began reassembling itself in reverse. Mountains formed from crushed rock. Large stones began flying back to where they belonged. The debris, pebbles and dust in our cave began rising back to their original positions.

I looked at Timmy and was glad to see guilt and relief written over his face. He looked at me and let loose a broken giggle. I returned a smile and we just sat there, grinning nonsensically to ourselves even though we had almost caused a major natural disaster.

The Dragon's Lair in the Yellow Mountains

St Joseph's College, Lim, Jason – 12

“Boom!” Thunder roared as I scanned my surroundings.

“Where am I? Why am I wearing these clothes?” I was wearing a silk robe and a pleated skirt. All the while, rain drenched me and my newfound ensemble.

The rain pelted down as I ran to the nearest shelter: a small cave. A mysterious aura surrounded me when I stepped into the dark, spooky cave. I lay on the ground, wondering what to do next. “Why am I here?” I tried to recall my day at school, but I couldn't. Was this a dream? I pinched myself. “Ouch!” No, this was not a dream. I thought my memory had been wiped.

Suddenly, I heard voices coming from inside the cave and I jumped to my feet.

“Hey! How's the plan going?”

Another man replied, “It's impossible! It will never work! We will never find the Dragon's Lair. It's said to be in the Yellow Mountains but how can we find it? There are thousands of mountains here!”

The man was furious. “Didn't you read the clue? It says, ‘Deep in the mountains of China hides an invincible dragon. There the clouds spread as the springs breathe out vapour. Up you go and you shall find the Dragon's Lair. But, beware of the heat there.’”

Why would they want a dragon, if it even existed? Then, I heard something that perturbed me: the men were planning to kill the emperor! It sounded surreal: they were planning to kill the Han emperor, one of the most powerful people on the planet at that time!

I followed them out of the cave, to a nearby village. They were met by a gang who seemed to know their plan. They got on their horses and rode off.

A man came out of a little cottage and saw me. I was frightened and ran for my dear soul. Thoughts raced through my mind as I ran and ran. Eventually, I stopped but the man was still running after me! He picked me up and took me to his cottage. I felt hopeless. I prayed until the man came back. He wiped my tears and said, “Are you alright, little boy? You should be with your mother right now. Ever since the bandits came, life has not been the same...”

I asked, “Why are you doing this? Are you one of the people planning to kill the emperor?” Thousands of questions burst out of my mouth. Moreover, I explained that I was a boy who came from the 21st century.

The man muttered under his breath, “So the legend is real: when the empire is going to perish, there shall be a savior who will change the world.” He explained that he was a secret agent from the 22nd century, and what would happen if we failed to stop the murderers: no one in modern China will exist. China would be covered with the eternal flames of the mighty dragon, making it impossible for anyone to live there.

We immediately took action; the man took me to a car. “Umm... won't it be too obvious to take a car from thousands of years in the future?” I sarcastically clamoured. Suddenly, the car became invisible.

“Never mind,” I quipped.

I hopped into the car and we went after the horses. Vroom! We were flying! The car had many tricks up its sleeve. It could become invisible, fly, shoot tracking darts and even had a super turbo button which would help you travel at 500 miles per hour. We followed them to the mountains high above, then scanned the surroundings and saw something very peculiar...

One mountain had smoke rising from its summit. I thought it was a hidden volcano at first but realized that steam was coming from small puddles on the ground. Could this be...? Ah! It was mentioned in the clue! “There the clouds spread as the springs breathe out the vapour.” It must be the mountain before us. I signaled to the agent and we swooped down, landing on the ground with a thud. We set up camp near the cliff, waiting for the gang to appear. I was nearly asleep when they arrived; the agent woke me, and we started following them.

They approached the mountain. To our surprise, they walked into a waterfall! The agent gave me a pair of goggles. “These can help you detect danger or living species with thermal technology. It also has stun darts but use them wisely.” I snuck in the waterfall and sensed the area with my goggles. I wondered why there were no signs of any dragons, not even a snake.

We ventured further and we saw a beautiful old palace. There were magnificent dragon sculptures all around. “Hey, is there someone following us? I hear footsteps,” said one of the gang members. We ran to a nearby dragon sculpture and I leaned against the portrait of a particularly lively dragon.

Creak!

I began falling downwards into a trapdoor, but I was too scared to scream.

Plop!

I rubbed my back, and the agent jumped down too.

Roar!

Was that the dragon? It got hotter and hotter as we walked into the basement. The space was abnormally large and there were thousands of doors. What was the purpose of these doors? Curious, I walked to one of the doors and pulled it open, wondering if the dragon was inside.

The agent pushed me out of the way, just as arrows shot out. I should have known: why would the dragon not be guarded by traps?

But how could we find out which room the dragon was hiding in? We would be dead before reaching the tenth door!

Footsteps followed us; it was the murderers. The agent took out a laser gun and shot the gang one by one. I took my stun darts and joined the battle.

“No, run!” the agent shouted.

“I’m not leaving you behind!”

We were shocked as the thugs surrounded us. “You didn’t expect that, did you? It has been a long time, Agent 993.”

The agent looked surprised. “Why are you here? You’ve already done so much harm to the modern world.” We were sprayed by bullets and retreated.

As we were thinking of surrender, a dragon flew out. It was red with golden eyes that crept me out. It breathed out mighty flames. Yes! We were saved!

We used the distraction to flee the basement. We ran out panting, while the people battled inside. Suddenly, jets flew above us – it was our support team! Armed agents rushed into the basement and caught the band of criminals out.

“You will pay for this,” said one.

The agents poured water into the basement and locked the trapdoor. The dragon roared in fury and anger as it drowned.

The fire was put out and we had won. Or... had we?

There was another dragon! This one was much bigger. It flew in the air, hissing at us.

“I think we just killed his child...,” I stammered.

The jets took off at once and sprayed the dragon with hydro cannons. The dragon snickered hysterically, as if it was being tickled. It countered by using his fiery tail to flick us away.

I ran to the palace for cover when I saw a mirror.

“I’ve been expecting you,” it whispered mysteriously.

I stared into the mirror and questioned how it knew me. The mirror didn’t reply. Once again, I looked in the mirror and saw myself fighting the dragon with something...a sword?

I felt my hands grab hold of something, looked down and to my surprise, I had a sword in my hands. It was big and strangely watery.

“Go, my child. Free the palace!”

I grasped the sword and knew what to do. I was full of determination, though the odds were against me.

I leapt in the air, slashing the dragon. The sword hit its mark, and the dragon moaned in pain. The jets dropped water bombs on the dragon.

After a few heavy hits, my sword was suddenly surrounded by a shield of water. I swung it as hard as I could into the dragon’s belly.

It was a critical hit! Lava poured out of its skin. The dragon cried in agony as it shrunk into thin air. We had gotten the last laugh.

The agent explained that the people who wanted to murder the emperor were in a terrorist organization from the modern age.

My journey was over. It was time to go home.

Agent 993 took the terrorists to ultra-high security jails, bringing me home on the way. Agent 993 gave me one of his rare smiles and said, “Well done, kid.” Then, they left in the blink of an eye.

I thought of the dragon’s lair. Were there other dragons? Why did the mirror help me? Will the dragons come back? I fell asleep.

What I didn’t see were the red eyes staring at me through the window...

Monkey Rock in Huangshan

St Joseph's College, Yam, Lok Yin Andre – 12

Huangshan (also known as Yellow Mountains) is a breathtaking mountain with a long history, some of which not many people know about. Take the Monkey Rock, for example. Its presence is mysterious, and few archaeologists know about its origins. Many have tried to guess, but below is one of the many theories.

A long time ago, more than a hundred monkeys roamed the Yellow Mountains. No, not normal monkeys, but creatures with unnatural red hair, a pair of bloodshot eyes, bared teeth, and a curled-up tail. They were monsters who slept in freezing cold mountain caves during the day, and terrorized other animals at night. Every day, as the daylight began to dim, the moods of the animals did too, because they knew that the monkeys would soon awaken. As the sun slowly disappeared from view, the mountain animals would hear a chilling sound, a sound so ghastly that even the devil would be petrified. It was the cry of the monkeys, and they were not afraid to let the whole world hear it.

The monkeys were fast creatures, and this ability was used to their advantage while fulfilling their nightly ritual: snatching newborns. No one knew where the newborns were taken, or why the monkeys took them, but they knew one thing: The newborns were never to be seen again. Animals would go to sleep at night, and find their offspring gone the next day. The only piece of evidence that proved they were stolen was an occasional strand of unnatural red hair.

One day, the mountain animals decided that they had had enough, so they decided to form a plan to get rid of the monkeys once and for all. However, this proved to be harder than expected. The monkeys were quick on their feet, so they could not be caught easily. Also, they had sharp teeth, so the animals could not avoid the possibility of being bitten. Just as everyone was desperately thinking of a way, an old goat stepped out and shared his idea: The animals could collect buckets of lava from the active volcanoes nearby, and the eagles could drop them down on the monkeys' living habitats, burning them until they begged for mercy. Many animals nodded in agreement, and it was then decided that this would be the plan.

Suddenly, a voice called out, "If we do this, won't we be as cruel as the monkeys? Won't burning them be even more cold-blooded than their stealing our newborns?"

The animals realized this was true, and they turned to look at the goat doubtfully. The goat thought for a while, stroking his beard in the process, and he replied confidently, "Well, instead of burning them, why not just scare them? Either way, they'll be gotten rid of." The animals thought this was a good compromise, and they resolved to only spilling molten lava around their homes without harming them.

The animals then elected three eagles to do the perilous job, including Ning, who was fast at flying but quite clumsy; Hong, who was sharp-eyed but slow; and Feng, who was the cleverest of all, but lacked the ability to stay calm in exciting situations. Feng grinned from ear to ear as his name was announced. His chest swelled up like a balloon, and he flapped his wings excitedly. Ning and Hong were also quite pleased to have this honor, and they rubbed their talons in enthusiasm. After a few days, the trio received detailed instructions for the assault. Feng quickly read through their entirety, and memorized them in a flash, being the cleverest in the pack. He explained the whole procedure to the others patiently and kindly, even demonstrating the process. With such a good leader, Ning thought, what could possibly go wrong?

Meanwhile, in the icy caves of Huangshan, the monkeys slowly stirred, their eyes gradually adjusting to their surroundings. They started the night by raising a terrible cry once again and began bounding across the mountain, towards the other animals' habitats. However, their leader, an old monkey called Yuan, stopped them mid-step. He hobbled onto a large slab of rock outside the cave and bellowed with a voice so deep that it sounded as if he were using a bullhorn. "Fellow monkeys, I have an announcement to make. Today, we won't be randomly snatching newborns; instead, we have a specific target."

The monkeys stared at their superior, cocking their head sideways. Yuan ignored this and continued, "As you might have noticed, my age is getting the best of me, and I haven't been able to walk properly. That's why I have been collecting newborns for as long as I can remember: to prepare an Elixir of Youth."

Now, the monkeys were confused. What was an Elixir of Youth? What properties did it have?

“I understand you have many questions, but for now, just focus on one goal: Snatch a pheasant’s tail and bring it back to me before dawn.”

The monkeys could not disobey his orders, out of respect to their leader, so they immediately sprang into action. They snuck up to the pheasants’ territory while walking on their tiptoes, and targeted a pheasant, which was away from all its companions. The pheasant was walking slowly, completely unaware of the danger that lurked behind it. Suddenly, the monkeys lunged forward and grabbed hold of the pheasant’s tail. There were so many monkeys that the pheasant could not resist at all. Then, a monkey opened its jaws to its full capacity, and bit off the poor pheasant’s tail with a sickening crunch. After that, the ruthless monkeys tossed away the limp pheasant, grabbed hold of the tail, and scurried back to their home as fast as they could.

“It’s time.” Hong was observing the monkey habitation from afar, and he had just seen the monkeys return to the inside of the cave. He, along with Ning and Feng each took hold of a large container filled to the brim with hot lava. The heat was unbearable, but the eagles knew that the whole forest depended on them. They flew with all their might, and finally reached the monkeys. Remembering not to harm the creatures, the eagles carefully circled the air just above them, staying hidden at all times. However, when Feng hovered more closely, he saw something that chilled his blood. Hundreds and thousands of animal newborns were laid in the caves where the monkeys lived, and he saw a familiar shape amongst them. It was his younger brother, who was previously snatched by the creatures!

“No!” Feng completely panicked, and as he tried to fly down to save his lost sibling, he lost control of his container, and the lava poured down like it had a life of its own. Shaken by Feng’s cry, Ning himself lost his balance too, and his container fell.

Their position was already known, so there was no point in hiding. The trio flew down to see the damage that they had done and were stunned to see that the lava was melting everything in sight! The monkeys tried hard to escape, but the cave entrance was blocked with magma-covered rocks. Only Yuan was still safe, as he was still standing on the slab of stone.

He glared at the eagles hatefully, then immediately left his spot and went to rescue his companions by pulling the large lava-molten rocks out, even if that meant his hands would burn. He cried out in pain as one of the rocks landed on his leg, but he still continued. After a while, he realized it was no use, and crouched down on the slab of stone in frustration and anger. Tears running from his eyes, he cried, “I will get revenge for you, my fellow monkeys!” Then, still crouching on the stone, he closed his eyes, never opening them again...

Afterwards, Feng, Ning and Hong could only return to their homes and tell their fellow animals about their mistake. Although nobody liked the monkeys, the animals were still shaken by their death. They also learnt a lesson: No matter how evil or malicious one may be, they still don’t deserve to be hurt. The terror in the eyes of Yuan would forever haunt Feng, Ning and Hong, the trio who was supposed to scare away the so-called “evil” monkeys.

Now, you can still see Yuan crouching on a slab of stone, gazing at the sea of clouds in Huangshan. He is still plotting revenge on the other animals, and waiting for the day his companions will return...

A New Season of Harvest

St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Del Mundon, Giuliana – 13

“This is it, team!” Rong exclaims. “It’s our first time competing in the Huangshan Harvest Festival Rush. We can finally bring honour to our village! Are you with me?”

His plump little brother, Bao, claps in glee. Next to him is their neighbour, Grandpa An, who smiles serenely.

A gong rings. Two figures appear, one with a flowing gold robe and another wearing blue.

“Greetings, competitors!” the man in blue says. “I am Li Bai, the Poet of Spring, creator of the Festival Rush trials. Your goal is to reach the top of the mountain and grab the golden wheat. Whoever wins will be granted a wish by our Emperor Huang.

“There are three rules. Firstly, there must be three people in a team. Secondly, only men can join. Lastly, you cannot make a wish that harms other villages.”

Rong looks at the other three teams, all of who have emerged victorious before: Chengkan, Nanjing, and Xidi.

Bishan, Rong’s home, has lost this ruthless contest repeatedly, missing countless wishes for a full harvest: famine wreaking havoc in their home for seventy years.

“Your first trial is the Trial of Strategy, the elimination round. You must reach Purple Cloud Peak through these slopes.” He points to the side of the mountain.

“You may use any equipment to climb to Purple Cloud Peak. May the Huangshan Harvest Festival Rush...” he pauses, creating tension in the air.

“Begin!”

Trial of Strategy

All the teams do not miss a beat in climbing the slope using their equipment.

Rong begins climbing with his stick—the only equipment each of Rong’s teammates have.

Despite Bao’s circular size, the vibrant boy climbs with ease.

Rong hastens and hears the bickering of the nearby Xidi team. Midway through, Rong turns in realisation and sees Grandpa An blissfully watching them.

Rong groans, descending. “Grandpa, we have to go!”

The old man points at his feeble legs. Grandpa An wouldn’t be his first choice if it weren’t for everyone else in Bishan refusing to participate. They had lost hope for seventy years, after all.

“Get on my back!” The man obeys before Rong resumes climbing.

He sees how distant he is from everyone, despite hearing Chengkan’s snickering. It only fuels Rong’s might to climb swiftly, undeterred by the weight on his back.

He reaches the top and puts Grandpa An down safely. The first sight he sees is Bao waving at him without a trace of fatigue. He smiles but falters as he notices everyone already at the top, sneering at him.

Li Bai appears. “The team eliminated is—”

Rong squeezes his eyes shut, knowing his fate.

“Nanping!”

All teams gasp collectively.

“What?” Ru’s, the Nanping leader, face becomes beet red.

“You have broken the second rule,” he says sternly. With a wave of his brush, Ru's bun is untied. “Only men can participate.”

Ru sobs. “I wanted to join, even just once.” Her team comforts her.

“Unfortunately, you have to go back.” Li Bai flicks his brush and the team vanishes in a blink.

Even though it was dumb luck, Rong couldn't help but pity her. However, he has to use this opportunity to accomplish what he came here for.

Trial of Strength

“The next trial is the Trial of Strength,” Li Bai says. “You must tame the Emperor's enchanted beasts.”

Li Bai paints in mid-air, forming three glowing, colossal creatures, resembling a leopard, a tiger, and a panda. Rong would've found them ethereal if it weren't for their snarls.

“When you tame the animal, you will move onto the next trial.”

Once Li Bai fades away, the leopard runs after Chengkan, while the tiger chases after Xidi. Yin, Chengkan's leader, throws meat on the ground. Wu, Xidi's leader, has a more forceful approach by grappling the tiger.

The panda charges at Bao.

“Easy!” Rong jumps in front of his brother. “We're not going to hurt you.”

The panda stops, and Rong drops his stick. The beast approaches and sniffs, its growls becoming less aggressive.

Bao leans towards the panda with outstretched arms while the panda reciprocates the gesture. Grandpa An joins in and strokes its dazzling fur.

Suddenly, Rong hears a shout and sees Wu chase away Yin’s leopard with his tiger as Yin clutches his leg on the ground.

Wu snickers, commanding his tiger to run, leaving his teammates to chase after him.

Rong rushes over to Yin's side. “Are you okay?”

“Leave me be.”

“Let me help, please.” Rong rips some cloth from his shirt and wraps it around Yin's wound, who cynically gapes at the gesture. He finishes and gets ready to leave.

“Wait!” Yin whispers to his team. They shuffle to get equipment out of his bag and attach it to the panda. “This is a glider for your panda to cross long gaps. We've used this before to beat Xidi.”

“Thank you!” Rong beams and gets on the panda with Bao and Grandpa An.

“Win for Chengkan,” Yin mutters as they leave.

Trial of Speed

As the trio rides through the granite peaks and countless pine trees, even passing by Wu's panting teammates, Li Bai hovers above them.

"Congratulations. You have moved over to the Trial of Speed, the final trial. You must now take the path to Lotus Peak." Li Bai points to a gleaming string forming a route to the top. "Emperor Huang awaits."

Having ridden the panda for a long time, Rong's eyes finally land on a familiar tiger on a suspended bridge, which fuels his determination.

Without warning, Wu takes out his sickle and slashes the rope of the bridge.

"No!" Rong watches in despair as the bridge falls and Wu vanishes from his sight.

He looks around, desperate. His eyes land on the glider strapped on the panda, then looks up at the peak above him.

"We're taking a detour," he announces.

With a new resolve, he turns the panda then it runs like the wind to the mountain top.

When they arrive, he sees Lotus Peak across a deep chasm.

"It's now or never!"

The panda launches itself off the peak. Rong extends the glider.

"We're flying!" Rong sees birds flying and peaks of different heights emerging from the clouds.

They approach Lotus Peak and get ready to land. Wu watches in alarm as he sees the group soar above him.

Once the group lands, Rong shouts, "We're a hair behind him! Keep going!"

The panda roars and beelines toward the golden wheat that stands on a stone pedestal, mere metres away from them.

"It's mine!" Wu reaches his hand out to grab the wheat but Grandpa An swipes it away from the pedestal with his stick.

Wu jumps off of the tiger and sprints. Rong intercepts and tackles him to the ground.

"Get off!" Wu spits.

"Bao, now!"

Bao leaps from the panda, slamming onto the ground, reaching his stubby arms to hug the golden wheat. A flash of light appears, the emperor and poet suddenly standing before them.

"Bishan wins!" Li Bai declares. The emperor clears the fog below them. Birds dance above and plants below bloom around their feet.

"Young villager," Emperor Huang starts. "What you have done today has been a feat. Your village will be proud."

"Thank you, Emperor." Rong bows, and so does Grandpa An and Bao, who trips.

"Now, you may receive your wish."

Finally, Rong's village can have full bellies.

He opens his mouth but stops. He glances at Wu, crying as he kneels on the ground. Surely, his village will not be kind to him after his defeat.

His mind then thinks of Yin, who kindly offered him equipment that helped him win, and Ru, who has a love for the festival that he relates to, but is unable to participate for a rule she cannot control.

"Emperor," Rong starts. "I wish that all villages have a harvest this year."

"You cannot make a wish that harms—" The emperor pauses. "What?"

Even Wu looks baffled.

He exchanges looks with the poet. "You want to *help* the other villages?"

"For seventy years, my village has lost and starved. None of us should feel this way."

The emperor nods. "Very well. I will grant your wish. Perhaps, next year, we will have a slight change in the trials."

The poet raises his brows. "Emperor Huang, whatever do you mean?"

"I announce a new trial: The Trial of Benevolence. For this boy has shown us that there is something valuable in one's heart. Let the villages know about your kindness and rejoice!"

In a flash, Rong and his team return home. The people erupt in cheers, embracing them.

"Cheers to Rong, Bao, and Grandpa An for bringing us a fruitful harvest!"

They throw the liveliest feast they have had in seventy years as they gather around a bonfire, where Rong tells the story of their victory.

The next morning, he gazes at the villagers happily getting the fresh soil ready for the new harvest.

The History Behind the Surname Zhuge

St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Woon, Jia Wen Mirabelle – 14

Do you know the myth of how the Chinese surname 'Zhuge' came about? Let us travel back to the time of 48000 BC...

A dense layer of fog covered the peak of Huangshan, home to two tribal groups—the Neanderthals, who called themselves the Zhu's, and Homo sapiens, who called themselves the Ge's. Sapphire-coloured blue jays and fiery red cardinals soared from above, and some laid their nests on the mountains for their serenity. Magnificent waterfalls poured down, and pristine streams gurgled through pebble stones. Amidst the beautiful scenery, however, there was much animosity between the Zhu and Ge tribes. The latter, who had evolved from the former to be more intelligent albeit less tough, were always looking down on the Zhu's, whom they regarded as slow-witted, rough creatures.

One night, Fei, a young Neanderthal teenager, was sitting outside his mud hut while gazing at the night sky. *Today was a terrible day*, he thought. He could not forget the humiliating scene when the Ge tribesmen mocked and threw stones at him when he asked if he could join in their game of catch. "The Ge's aren't that different from us anyway—why do they have the right to disregard the Zhu tribe? They always treat us as if we were wild animals. Someone ought to teach them a lesson!" he grumbled while throwing stones to the ground furiously.

Suddenly, a black shadow swooshed past the forest just before Fei. *Things have been strange recently*, he thought. There had been villagers disappearing and cattle bones left behind in the fields. Occasionally, he would see a dark shadow haunting the village. "Perhaps I was just imagining things," he murmured to himself. Yet all of a sudden, an enormous serpent-like animal with massive wings ascended to the night sky from below, and his jaw dropped instantly. The creature was dazzlingly radiant and perfectly matched the description of the fire-breathing dragon Nong from Chinese mythology. Fei froze in astonishment. "Thundering turtles! I...I must tell everyone about this!" he exclaimed. According to the myth, Nong, who dwelled in the mysterious, murky cave Longmen (Chinese for 'Dragon's Gate'), was notorious for devouring villagers and their livestock on the mountain. It was said that the dragon grew in power day by day, and there was only one way to secure everlasting peace—to kill Nong.

Rapidly, the news of the dragon's appearance spread throughout town and even reached the Ge clan. Both tribes immediately took action to fight the dragon. Over the next few months, the Zhu clan sent some of their strongest men to battle the dragon. The stocky Zhu's were close to killing Nong, but the dragon slyly escaped before they could destroy it. On the other hand, the dexterous Ge people succeeded in using snares to trap Nong, but the dragon bit off the string used to make the snare and could not be brought down by the puny Ge people, who had difficulty chasing down a buffalo, much less slaughtering a dragon.

After the failed attempts in killing Nong, the Zhu tribe leader, Wei, discussed with his tribe's elders on what they should do next. A wise and aged tribesman suggested an alliance with the Ge tribe. "The Ge's are wily creatures and can provide combat strategies, while our men are tough enough to battle the dragon," he claimed. Wei was doubtful whether this idea would work. *We have a chance of defeating the dragon with the Ge's help, but what if the Ge's are too proud to work alongside us? Will they abandon us halfway throughout the battle?* Despite these arising concerns, Wei gave in to the idea. "I will do what's best for my tribe," he proclaimed with determination.

The very next day, Wei headed to meet Feng—the leader of the Ge tribe—and tried to convince him to agree on an alliance between both tribes to combat Nong. Feng responded with a conceited laugh, "We don't need to cooperate with you Zhu's! Another elder had already suggested this idea, but of course, I rejected him. Although we are physically weaker than you, we have enough intelligence and wit to defeat the dragon alone. Fighting alongside the Zhu's would be a disgrace to us."

Upon hearing this, Wei stormed out of the room in rage. Part of his anger was due to the humiliation from Feng, but another reason was the fact that destruction was certain, as no alliance was made. As days pass by, Nong will become increasingly powerful, but what can we do?" Wei asked himself in frustration.

However, Wei's distress did not last long. Just a few days after the two leaders' meeting, Nong launched a vicious attack on the Ge village and ruthlessly massacred half of the Ge tribe's population. Seeing the drastic situation, Feng was filled with bitter remorse for his attitude to Wei and sent word to him that he now agreed on an alliance.

After the alliance was created, the Zhu's and Ge's worked together in preparation for the battle against Nong. The Ge's taught the Zhu's battle strategies and how to make snares, while the Zhu's impressed the Ge's with their accuracy and strength in throwing projectiles. The Zhu's were also great coaches when it came to physical training and helped knock many Ge men in shape. Apart from that, the Zhu's realised that their counterparts were much more simple creatures. They never had any malicious intent in their hearts and were always sharing whatever hunt they had captured. Soon, the Ge's realised that no tribe was superior over another and that there was much to learn from each other. They humbled themselves and became close friends with the Zhu's.

After months of preparation, the Zhu's and Ge's finally marched towards cave Longmen to fight an all-out battle with Nong. Advancing to the battlefield gave chills down every man's spine—it was a dark, misty night, and eerie sounds could be heard from the cave. When they arrived, Nong was already outside the cave, snarling and exposing his razor-like teeth, as if he already knew that both tribes would come to fight him that night. The hearts of all fighters skipped a beat when they saw the ferocious dragon, but they knew they still had hope of winning with the present alliance. Taught by the Ge's that encircling the enemy was advantageous, everyone surrounded Nong from all sides. After a fierce battle cry, spears were thrown like quickly-whizzing rockets onto the dragon. The throws were both powerful and accurate, as both tribes had improved their physical strength through joint training. Unfortunately, Nong was not defeated by these weapons. He breathed a long stream of fire at the men and declared smugly to them, "Foolish idiots! How dare you challenge me? Now you shall all die and perish!"

Cautious of the fire, the men quickly retreated to a nearby forest. Being clever creatures, some Ge's threw sticks and large rocks to a nearby clearing in order to divert Nong's attention. True enough, the dragon fell for the trap and charged towards the sound. Seizing this opportunity when the dragon had his back turned towards him, a Zhu tribesman aimed at Nong's tail, which was foretold in the myth to be Nong's weakness, and Nong roared in pain. He fell to his side in anguish, and with one more spear thrown into his neck, the dragon took his last breath.

A Zhu tribesman laid a pitchfork on the dragon while announcing triumphantly, "Three cheers for both tribes! Together, we've successfully defeated Nong. For this, we shall feast together on raw and juicy dragon meat!" The Zhu people raised their spears in enthusiasm, whereas the Ge people were not so keen on the idea of having raw meat, fearing that diarrhoea would come next. Nevertheless, both tribes agreed that a joint celebration must be held.

The party began, and everyone danced with animal feathers stuck in their hair around a bonfire. After the party had ended, Feng formally declared to everyone, "I represent all Ge people to apologise for our previous hostility and ill-treatment to the Zhu's." He bowed down to seek forgiveness and continued, "The battle against Nong has allowed us Ge's to realise the Zhu people's strengths. Because of this, we have swallowed our pride, and both tribes are bonded by friendship and love. After a discussion with Wei, I happily announce that from tomorrow onwards, both tribes are merged into one! There shall be no more discrimination amongst us, and everyone will be called the Zhuge people!" The Ge's cheered with high spirits, and the Zhu's beat their chests loudly to show approval, which the Ge's frowned upon and saw as barbarism, but they still smiled with good grace. Seeing this joyful party atmosphere, Wei thought contentedly in his heart, *May peace continue to prevail on the mountains!*

And that, my dear readers, is the story behind the Chinese surname 'Zhuge'.

Memories

St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary & Primary School, Yan, Andrew – 13

11 May, 2013

Dear Diary, today I had the same old nightmare again. Since my psychologist recommended me to write it down somewhere, here I go:

“Help! The ground is shaking and the village is burning!” I’m stuck amongst hordes of panicking people, in what seems to be a village atop some mountains.

“The earth devils are back!”

“Quick, pass me the water bucket before it’s too late!”

“...We don’t have water! The well’s completely dry!”

“There are cracks appearing on the ground!”

“Evacuate the women and children now!”

“It’s the end of the world! Run for your lives!”

“We’re losing control of the fire! We need to leave before it’s too late!” A woman next to me is pleading with another stranger, who I swear I’ve met before, but it’s probably just *deja vu*.

“I was born in this village, and I will die in it!”

“Please! Just go with us! One day we can come back and rebuild it!”

“...It won’t be the same village I know and love.”

“Very well then. May the gods spare you from the demons’ wrath.” The woman who was pleading with the stranger leaves.

My new psychologist means well, but I doubt this will help. I’ve had this nightmare every night for three years now: what makes him think that I can be cured?

I hope that one day I won’t have to dream of that cursed village on fire again.

12 May, 2013

Dear Diary, today the CGTN aired a special program about the 5th anniversary of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake.

I can vaguely remember experiencing the earthquake in the Chengdu metropolis during our badly timed family trip to Sichuan that year, and seeing people literally panic in the streets. Apart from that, I can’t recall anything else. But every time I think of the broken windows, crumbling houses and fallen trees in footage of damaged villages closer to the epicenter, I feel nauseous. It’s hard to fathom how this earthquake reduced entire towns to rubble in less than a minute.

Right now, I feel like this is the hypothesis that best explains the cause of my recurring nightmares. Therefore, I've decided to educate myself on the matter in order to understand the plight of people affected by the earthquake and try to find a silver lining in this horrible disaster. I hope that my nightmares will stop if I turn this bad memory into something more positive.

According to the program, infrastructure and healthcare in the areas affected by the earthquake still aren't up to standard. I hope I can find a means to help people living in those places.

24 June 2013

Dear Diary, great news! I won an art competition in my district and the grand prize was four round-trip plane tickets. I can use this opportunity to revisit Sichuan and perhaps stay in a local village affected by their earthquake. I'm sure my parents will agree to this since they've always wanted to see Sichuan's biodiversity up close, and last time we weren't able to see Sichuan's endangered red pandas due to the earthquake. I can't wait to tell them about this!

18 July 2013

Dear Diary, we're off to Sichuan tomorrow! Almost everything's been planned out and I've even managed to book a two-night stay in a traditional 'Danba' village. Unfortunately, the village was damaged by the 2008 earthquake and still isn't fully repaired, but I don't mind at all. The hostels are cheaper anyway.

Not sure why, but my parents seem a little uneasy whenever I discuss the trip. Oh well, grownups are grownups. They never talk to me proactively anyway. I'll bring you along so that I can write down my travel experiences.

19 July 2013

Dear diary,

Whew! We just reached our hotel in Chengdu even though it's already evening. Our flight got delayed until the afternoon and that messed up our travel plans. We were planning to do some sightseeing, but there isn't even time now.

C'est la vie, I suppose. We'll just have to increase our sightseeing pace tomorrow.

20 July 2013

Dear diary,

Today was another tiring day. We took a tour of the city, passing through the ancient Wuhou Shrine, the picture-perfect Wangjiang Park, and ended the day in the famous Panda Breeding Center not far from the city. The mighty terracotta statues inside the Wuhou Shrine were fascinating and the beauty of the riverside Wangjiang Park was unmatched, but I liked the Panda Breeding Center the most as I could finally see pandas in a habitat less enclosed than that of Ocean Park! I think I understand why Chengdu is considered a hidden gem of China.

Yesterday night, I wasn't able to sleep very well due to my nightmare. Strangely, my parents could not do so either. I'm beginning to suspect that we have a connection with Sichuan...

21 July 2013

Dear diary,

After six hours on a mountain road seemingly to nowhere, we finally arrived at the 'Danba' villages near the border with Tibet. This was well worth it! It feels like I'm actually stepping into Ancient China, and the Tibetan-style houses are a marvel to behold.

What's interesting about this village is how traditional the way of life is. It's a world apart from the hustle and bustle of the 'Concrete Jungle'. People travel around the villages by horse and cart and grow crops in the surrounding plains. Another funny thing is, they still believe in a myth of 'the earth dragon and the great shaking'. It sounds suspiciously like the events in my nightmare.

Apparently this village was rebuilt from the ruins of an older, destroyed village. The locals say that this is the sacred place where 'truth comes to light'. I wonder what that means.

22 July 2013

Dear Diary, I'm ready to embark on the hike. We're a bit late because I slept badly, but it doesn't really matter.

I saw my parents talking amongst themselves last night. I couldn't hear what they were muttering but they looked distraught. Something's wrong.

23 July 2013

Dear Diary, today I learnt something new about my parents – something I wish I had known earlier. I really shouldn't have judged them for being silent in front of me.

After we reached the ruins of the abandoned village after a one-hour trek, we saw a strange piece of paper encased in a glass case.

Our tour guide explained the significance of this shred of yellowed paper to us. Legend says that it was written in a strange language only known by the original residents of the village. They had lived in perfect harmony for centuries until a great earthquake struck the village and caused a fire which burnt it down. After some of the survivors returned decades later to start anew, a woman allegedly broke down in tears when she saw the charred remains of her dead boyfriend, who stayed behind to fight the fire.

But that's not the end of the story...

24 Jul 2013

Continuing on from where I left off–

After the tour guide explained this my parents burst into tears.

Now I know that my mom, who moved to Tangshan as a toddler, witnessed the 1976 earthquake first-hand. She was asleep when the earthquake struck, but woke up to a scene of total devastation. Although her family managed to move to a temporary shelter, her father volunteered to help rescue trapped survivors.

When he was tasked with rescuing people trapped within a crumbling building, she and her mother pleaded with him to stay behind. But he took the risk anyway, and rushed to help a group of starving survivors buried under the rubble. That was the last thing he knew before the building collapsed before my mother's eyes.

My dad also had a similar experience. Before meeting my mother, he was an aspiring firefighter. He thought of the profession as a honourable duty that would bring him a sense of pride and accomplishment. His ambitions were crushed when he saw his childhood friend burn to death during his first mission. After the incident, he refused to socialise with other people and generally attempted to avoid any human interaction.

They ended up meeting during a trekking tour into China's famous Wuyishan mountains. My mom was looking to broaden her horizons after taking a biology course, and my dad was disillusioned with urban life. After the month-long trek, they took a liking to each other, decided to exchange numbers, and the rest is history.

Both of them promised to get help and be more open with me. To be honest that doesn't matter much to me. I'm just glad that my true parents are 'back'. None of this would've been possible had I skipped this village for something else— China's mountains truly are magical.

Yesterday, I slept like a baby. No bad dreams, no waking up in the dead of night sweating all over my bed.

Fate really is a funny thing, isn't it?

I Believe in Dragons

St. Mark's School, Leung, Yin Tung Andrea – 14

When I was younger, my aunt used to tell me stories.

“Once upon a time, there were Eight Immortals,” she’d say in a soft, mysterious voice. “They lived on the island Penglai, where it was never winter, and had trees that bore enchanted fruit healing every ailment.”

Auntie was obsessed with the mythology and folklore of our Asian heritage.

She’d tell me tales of the Dragon King, the Ten Suns, how Pangu created the universe.

And I’d listen with shining eyes, gasping at all these mysterious moments.

“Sister!” It was my mum. “Are you done telling her those ridiculous tales?”

“Just a moment, *Jie Jie!*”

I winced. My mum wasn’t exactly the biggest fan of fantasy, which was unsurprising, given her lack of imagination.

She had always somewhat disapproved of my aunt, who was dreamy and whimsical, her polar opposite.

My aunt was the most wonderful storyteller. She’d tell me about the story of Longnu and Han Xiangzi like she’d been there herself, and talk about dragons as if they were real.

“Their scales glittered like polished jade, their eyes orbs of gold, claws sharp as a hawk’s,” she said, her eyes animated, bright as though they were orbs of gold themselves.

She loved the myths of the Yellow Mountains the most.

“Legend says, our ancestor Yellow Emperor descended from Huangshan, and that dragons lived on its cloudy peaks.”

The Emperor must’ve looked ridiculous in all-yellow attire.

“Li Bai himself visited the Yellow Mountains,” Auntie said, smiling wistfully. “He got tons of inspiration for his poems. If only I could get the same amount of inspiration he’d found in dreary Wyoming.”

She was an aspiring writer, talented, who had only one tiny problem—she couldn’t finish a single book. I knew she tried, but it was never enough.

Things got even harder when Uncle left.

I could still see the stacks of half-written drafts piled up in the corners of her tiny apartment, gathering dust. Stories that would never be discovered, characters that would never come to life.

She held on to her book of Chinese mythology, held on to the legends of shimmering dragons and towering mountains from which yellow emperors originated.

“One day,” she said. “One day I’ll go to Huangshan like all the great poets did, and find out what on that mountain gives them their knowledge and inspiration.”

She always wore a pearl pendant that seemed to glint like it was aflame. Her eyes reflected its light, so it seemed like she had twin stars in her pupils.

“And I’ll write a bestselling series, and we’ll be rich and move to California!” She lifted me up in her arms, and I giggled, grinning at the happiness on her face.

“Auntie,” I would say, after she’d put me down, “is it real? Everything you said?”

And she would reply—

“Yes.” Her eyes were faraway, like she was looking at something miles and miles away.

“But—” I avoided her gaze. My voice was timid. “Aren’t they just stories?”

And she would reply—

“They’re real, Fei Xiang. Never stop believing that.” She stroked my hair. “They thrive on belief. If you stop believing, they will no longer exist.”

“Oh! Does that mean I can see a dragon when I’m older?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll show you one day.”

And we talked, laughed, and dreamed.

The cold hard truth would come later, but at that moment, it was real.

I was a kid then. Now, I was fifteen, and we were standing at the foot of the Yellow Mountains, having been offered the chance of a lifetime—a free tour to Huangshan.

Even after my childhood had come and gone, Auntie kept telling me her tales.

I’d long stopped believing her.

My mum’s voice echoed in my ears. *“There is no such thing! Stop holding your head up in the clouds!”*

“Your aunt was a fool, and if you believe in her absurdity, then so are you. The world has no place for dreamers.”

I knew what she said was true. But yet some part, deep inside of me, still held onto these stories. They soothed me, made me feel like Auntie was right beside me.

Something about Auntie made me *want* to believe her, no matter how ludicrous it all seemed.

The awe of finally seeing the majestic mountains took away my breath; it was as stunning as my aunt described it—the rolling ocean of clouds that seemed to stretch on endlessly, the sculpted peaks reaching beyond the sky.

Auntie stood there, quiet, taking in the magnificent view. “How beautiful,” she murmured.

The pearl she wore seemed to glow in the mist. Like it was lit with a golden flame.

We hiked up the stone steps that were carved into the mountainside.

The higher we got, the more we saw, from misshapen trees that covered the rock like an emerald silk cloak to the lakes set deep in the valleys like jades adorning a crown. Clusters of villages were nestled in the mountains.

“Legend says,” Auntie started. “This was where Huangdi ascended into heaven.”

I smiled half-heartedly. “Sure.” I was tired, sweaty, and not in the mood for her stories. But she seemed undeterred. Her smile was as wide as ever.

She didn’t seem like someone who had just climbed up the Lotus Peak, the highest summit in the mountains.

The view was spectacular, but my knees were buckling a little, because just *maybe*, I had a tiny fear of heights.

Still, I felt like an eagle soaring above Huangshan, seeing the mountains from all the way up here.

The clouds were beneath us, obscuring the base, but we could see the other peaks stretching up to the sky, their unique silhouettes clear from this vantage point.

With their tips clawing towards heaven, rising above the clouds, they seemed like islands floating amongst a sea of billowing mist.

I turned away when my knees started to wobble a bit too much for my liking.

In front of us was a pool of water, as clear as a mirror.

“The Moon Pool,” my Aunt said, stepping forward dazedly.

Before I could stop her, she reached her hand into the pool.

“Auntie—“ I was trying to find a polite way to say ‘are you crazy?’ when she lifted a single gleaming object from the water. It was pill-like, and glowing faintly.

She walked towards the edge in a trance. My heart plummeted down a peak almost as tall as the one we stood on as I grabbed her arm. “Ah—Yi?”

She was looking up. I followed her gaze and I saw—

The shimmering forms of dragons swimming through the clouds. The sky was cracked open, like an egg, and the yolk was a radiant ball of light.

My jaw dropped.

“It is true,” she breathed, her eyes fixed on the sky. “See?”

I pinched myself just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

I wasn’t dreaming.

My aunt faced me. Her eyes were orbs of fiery gold. “My time has come. Please, keep our memory alive. Do not forget.”

Her skin rippled with jade-green scales. She smiled. “You are a remarkable girl. And you will grow into a remarkable woman. Thank you.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“Remember,” she whispered. Before I could comprehend her words, she popped the pill into her mouth and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Moments later, a coil of emerald green shot to the clouds above, joining the other dragons.

I thought I heard a cry of joy, reverberating through the mountains, echoing in my ears.

Then the hole started to knit itself back together, and the streaks of colors melted into the ball of light.

The crack in the sky closed up seamlessly, like it was never even there.

I blinked. Auntie had disappeared along with it.

On the ground was a necklace with a gleaming pearl pendant.

I picked it up and clasped it around my neck. It was an ember of warmth against my skin.

When I went down the mountain that day, the people in the tour would deny ever meeting a woman named Fei

Lung. Everyone back home would carry on as if she had never existed at all.

Auntie had vanished into thin air, every proof of her existence gone from the face of the earth.

“Aunt?” Mum said, an eyebrow cocked. “Ah—yi disappeared a year ago, remember? I understand you miss her, but you have to face reality.”

Reality.

Her eyes darkened. “She’s gone.”

Reality.

The only thing left was her necklace.

But I remember more.

I’ve kept her book of mythology, and remember her stories.

I remember her smile and her eyes.

Her memory lives on in me, and the stories my ancestors had told, they all continue to live on in me.

I will never forget.

Some people believe in aliens. Others believe in Bigfoot, or even the Loch Ness Monster.

I believe in dragons. Do you?

Crystal Disaster

St. Mary's Canossian College, Fu, Jaime – 14

A shining crystal appeared next to me in the middle of the market floor. The eyes of the surrounding shoppers lit up as if they'd spotted an oasis in the desert. Without hesitation, mothers dropped their children on the ground, farmers abandoned their cart of hard-grown crops, teenagers left behind their heated game of volleyball in hopes of obtaining the shining crystal.

A tall man with broad shoulders who was previously grazing his cattle got hold of the crystal. All hell broke loose. Villagers jumped on top of each other in a ferocious cat fight, clawing and biting the person in front. I rolled my eyes as I grabbed some rice from the empty stalls and left.

The deep grumble of a dragon's stomach came from below. Debris on the ground was bouncing and moving suspiciously fast considering there was no wind. Another crystal fell from the sky, not far from the first. The scene of people rushing towards it reminded me of when I fed the ravenous fish in the pond with some bread. Not only were crystals falling, so were rocks, mud, and... oh no!

The ground melted and sank deep into the enormous hollow inside the earth beneath me, like a pottery creation being destroyed by its creator. Cracks crept along the magnificent stone paths, razing our mountain village. The cracks were not new, however. They have been here since last month when Yan took the last clouds for weaving her famous cloud robes, after which the drought quickly followed. Villagers around me were frantically gathered their children, cattle and, of course, crystals, and dashed towards the central courthouse. I felt my mother's hand tightly grasping mine as we ran for our lives amidst the chaos. We didn't even glance at the crystals. My mom didn't believe in them. She said it was pure gluttony.

"Five crystals please!" the young lady demanded. She was wearing a delicate white cloud robe, with fifty-eight giant crystals dangling around her tiny neck—a sign of power and affluence. Her face was pale and ghastly and her eyes seemed lifeless as her frail body was almost blown away by the breeze. She snatched the crystals greedily after handing over a sack of rice enough to feed a family for a month. Everyone these days would rather starve than have fewer crystals on their neck than their neighbour. With less demand and depreciated value, we got by frankly because of the abundance of food.

It was common knowledge that the more crystals you own, the more power you have over others. Tim, with fifty crystals, raped my cousin Kate who only owned twenty crystals last month and no one dared to say anything about it. Alas, they even found him attractive! He drowned to death in the river shortly after as his crystals weighed him down. It was so ridiculous that everyone's life goal is to get more crystals, only to be trapped and suffocated by those very pebbles which brought them superiority.

"Villagers with fifty crystals or more shall receive immediate medical care and food. Others, line up according to your crystal status!" The chief, with a whopping eighty-six crystals on his neck commanded in the middle of the courthouse. The far corner to the left was crushed by a rock, turning about a quarter of the courthouse to rubble. It was the only intact structure after the horrific episode. I could sense the panic in the air as I hugged my mother and father on the cold hard floor. I could smell the obnoxious smoke and hear the occasional explosions in the background. Villagers around us clenched their crystals tightly. A group of teenage boys sitting behind us were contemplating a way to steal more crystals when no one was guarding them despite that the world was literally about to end.

"I told them this would happen... those stubborn pricks refused to listen!" Mother uttered under her breath. "What, mother?" I asked. I loved it whenever mother called the chiefs "stubborn pricks".

Mother was in a heated argument with the village weaver, Yan. She barked, "Stop taking the clouds from the sky for your pathetic robes! We have been experiencing less and less rain these years! Crops are dying!"

Yan, wearing her cloud robe and sixty-nine crystals, smirked, "Peasant! What do you know about artistry? Who needs rain anyways?" Just when she was shoved out of Yan's shop mother spotted another crowd of crystals merchants. Enraged, she screamed, "I am telling you, for the fiftieth time, stop digging the contents out of the earth! I've seen the mine, it's eroding our mountain to the core! The mountain will collapse and everyone will perish!" Of course, the merchants ignored the "village lunatic".

From the right of the courthouse, the bare hollow inside the mountain was visible. Crystals and some rocks were piercing out, revealing a weirdly familiar temple.

Mother carried me, like a two-year-old, into the cavern beneath the village and into the dark, mystic temple. She laid me down on a nearby rock and chanted a prayer. The golden candlelight from the altar in front shone on her olive skin. The walls of the temple were made of rocks, flourishing with flowers despite the absence of sunlight. "Mother Earth, I have resided in this village for long. The gluttony of these villagers, depriving your body of nutrients are despicable actions. I shall convert them back to nature, so they can nourish you," Mother prayed and picked me up again. "Here, mother, this is your granddaughter. I shall teach her your values and she shall serve you." Mother set a bag of crystals on the altar which she had stolen from the merchants, which was quickly engulfed.

"Argh!" Mother shrieked. There was a massive landslide. The rocks originally on the top of the mountain, along with the marble altar from the temple, crumbled on us. Apparently, the one before was just the introduction to mother earth's destruction. The woman in front of us tried to grab her children and flee but to no avail. I watched in horror as the world turned black in front of me.

Mother Earth sent me a vision. I was standing on top of the landslide, overlooking the ruins that used to be my home. The village, once located on top of the mountain, now sat at the bottom, the part of the mountain still standing caved over us. Irregularly shaped rocks, moss, and crystals were protruding out of the wall, some of which were loose and about to fall out. The village was completely demolished. The once magnificent stone courthouse was buried in the soil, along with the villagers' precious crystals, only the tip of the grey roof could be seen. Mother! Father! Were they still alive? I tried to sprint towards them but couldn't. I glanced down at my feet. Where were my feet?

Out of nowhere, a whirlpool of dirt, sand, and fallen leaves appeared in front of me which slowly grew in height and formed a female figure. She had only one crystal eye which glared into my soul, and wilting leaves as her dress. She seemed powerful, yet, incomplete. There were holes in her body, missing fingers and dry, cracking skin. Her mysterious, deep voice did not come from her mouth, but inside my head, "Mortal! What have you done to my body fawning over those pathetic crystals of yours?"

I realised she wasn't glaring at me, but through me. The whole village was kneeling and shaking behind me and dared not look at the woman. She continued, "Once you get out of the dirt, which I shall lend you a hand in, return the crystals to the Earth. Set free the clouds you have captured and let rain nourish my body. Plant pine trees on the land to strengthen this mountain. You shall rebuild your village and suffer the consequences of your actions. Be grateful you're still alive!"

Next thing I knew, villagers were cleaning up and obediently returned their once treasured crystals at the foot of the mountain where the minerals were absorbed instantly. Yan pulled apart her cloud robes and released them back to the sky. The village, rightfully so, suffered years of drought, storms and illnesses. It wasn't until everyone paid their monthly tributes to Mother Earth at the renewed temple that we experienced rainfall. The soil became fertile enough for the pine trees to be planted shortly after. Mother, now known as the daughter of Mother Earth, became the chief of the village. Father was pronounced the head of agriculture and he transformed our village into a prosperous export centre for quality rice and vegetables.

From then on, there was no more nonsense of crystals or cloud robes as status symbols. The pine trees sheltered and protected generations of villagers for centuries, acting as a reminder of the catastrophe. The beautiful crystals were hidden from men lest there shall be another disaster.

World of Wonders

St. Mary's Canossian College, Lam, Jamese – 13

A group of adventurous scientists went on a scientific trip to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor in eastern China. Out of their surprise, they discovered that the concept of magical places in stories ranging from The Lord of the Rings to the Avatar movie came from the place they are visiting.

They couldn't believe their eyes when they first saw the panoramic and spectacular view. The mountains were breathtakingly beautiful, with their sharp peaks, raised villages and floating clouds. Some of the pine trees were about 1500 years old, and tens of thousands of stone steps might be as ancient. Plus, according to the movie, a pair of poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on the mountains in the 8th century, and influenced Jack Kerouac and other "beat poets".

The scientists started exploring and hunting through the place. They found new species of animals there, and dinosaur bones. Dinosaur bones found in these and other Chinese mountains are the reason that so many stories feature dragons living in secret mountain caves. They went up to the second hill, and didn't expect to find poets still living there. The poets revealed the secrets about the place, unlike animals living in the other places of Earth, animals living there had different body types and structures and some were even combined with different animals. What the scientists didn't anticipate was that the animals knew how to communicate and talk with human being. The talking animals and the poets brought the scientists to a completely different world, The Peaceful Cave, which was built by ancients living there and with the help of magic in the past. In this beautiful world, dinosaurs hadn't extinct and they were being tamed thousand years ago. There were some poets in the cave and they helped the scientists settle down.

The poets and the animals started sharing their experiences. Originally, people died but these smart animals invented a new potion that ensured you to live forever without dying, hence one of the people living there was an ancient. The place was fabulous and tranquil 1000 years ago, so is the present. The reason why poets loved living on the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor was the place was filled with inspiration and these magical inspirations had a strong power to arouse them to create a wonderful poem. In fact, the entire place was made out of magic so it always felt so magical and unearthly.

High up in the clouds, was a tiny village. The poets led the scientists to the village by jumping onto clouds, where about 100 posterities had been living there for their entire lifetime. The scientists were all astonished by the structures of the houses and how unique they were. They started to learn more about the people living in the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor and learnt their daily habits and their traditions.

Time flew, and eventually, the scientists together with the poets returned back to the Science laboratory. They informed the internet about this really overwhelming and unexpected experience and on the following day, people started discovering about the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor and more and more scientists went there to do more research and investigation. People were amazed by its magic and more and more people started going on vacations to the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. The animals initially living there went to meet people that visited and shared the history about the Mountains of the Yellow Emperor. More and more people started understanding the place and it is now listed as one of the best places in the world.

Above the Clouds

St. Mary's Canossian College, Schuerz, Cris – 12

Yun stared up at the mountains near his village. They looked so tall and majestic. 'Yun' means 'cloud' in Chinese, and he had always wanted to go to the top of the mountains. As a naturally curious person, seeing the mountains every day and not being able to explore them because of his young age made him want to go up there even more. Yun could only see the bottom part of the mountains, as the top was always [cloaked](#) in mist. He wondered what was hiding beyond the clouds. He felt like something was calling out to him from the mountains, an adventure awaiting him at their peaks.

His teacher had once told him, "Believe in yourself and go for it," So he when he finally turned old enough to explore on his own, he did. Bidding his family farewell, he set out on his mountain journey. He had packed some provisions including sweet cakes, fruits, and tea, making sure there would be enough for his journey. As he approached the base of the mountains, he looked up at them, and said, "I'm ready, here I come!" and off he went.

Yun was young, fit, and strong, but the climb was a struggle even for him. He hadn't even walked for a couple of hours and he was already exhausted. As he advanced, he came across a listless body. He bent down to take a closer look and realized it was an old man. Yun asked, "Why are you here all alone? Are you alright? Would you like some food or drink?" The man waved his hand at Yun, signaling that he was alright and was happy to have some of the food offered. "Thank you for stopping. You are very kind. If you need any help, just call out my name, 'Tikki', and I will be there!" The old man then hobbled off, leaving Yun behind. He watched the man leave and disappear into the mist. Yun stared at the spot where the man had been just a moment before, shaking his head in amazement before resuming his journey.

Walking up the mountain, he enjoyed the scenery, resting every so often to admire the stunning view. After crisscrossing up the mountain for quite a while he stopped to get some rest again. To his surprise, a wolf appeared from the mist, and Yun jumped up in fear. He realized that the wolf was very skinny and was limping as if it had no strength. He took pity on the wolf and offered it some food. The hungry wolf quickly gulped it down and instantly looked refreshed and energized. "Thank you, kind boy," the wolf said. "If you need any help, just call out my name, 'Rikki', and I will be there." Yun smiled and thanked it, but thought to himself, "Do I look helpless? Why is everyone offering me help?" But his thoughts were soon forgotten when he looked up. "Wow!" He hadn't realized how far he had gone, and how close he was to the top now.

He got a rush of adrenaline as he continued at a faster pace with great anticipation of what was ahead. Stopping one last time before reaching the top, Yun heard the birds chirping in the trees. Yun couldn't help but notice how hungry they looked. So, he crumbled up some of his cake and threw it on the ground for them to eat. While the birds pecked on it, the largest one said, "If you ever need any help, call out 'My birds, come to me!' and we will be there." He now started to think that everyone on his journey knew something he didn't comprehend.

He walked for just a while longer and finally reached the summit. "Ahhhhh!" Yun breathed out, looking around him in amazement. He could see the layer of clouds below and felt as if he was on top of the world. All of a sudden, he felt someone cover his mouth with a cloth and smelled a strange odor. He felt dizzy, his sight blurred, and then passed out. The man lifted him up, placing him over his shoulder and walked off.

When Yun woke up, he found himself in a dark cave, with someone sitting on a log opposite him. The man raised an eyebrow and asked "Are you awake?" Yun rubbed his eyes and mumbled, "Where am I? Who are you? What do you want?" Yun looked around and tried to get up, only to realize he was tied to a post. The man replied, "You can call me Shan. I'll give you a task every day for three days, and if you complete them all, I won't do you any harm and set you free. Do you understand?" Yun nodded and gulped. He had a feeling this wasn't going to be good...

His first task was to go to the meadow and guess which special cow was the one Shan wanted to roast for dinner. Yun was very scared. A special cow? How was he supposed to know which one? Then he remembered the wolf's

words. He said, "Rikki!" and, sure enough, the wolf appeared in front of him. "You have called me. What do you need?" Yun explained the situation, and the wolf ran around quickly and inspected the cows. Finally, he circled around the one special cow. When Yun went up to the cow, studying it closely, he found a hole in its ear. He knew it was special. Just as Yun turned back about to thank the wolf, it ran off into the mist. Yun tied a rope around the cow's neck and took it to Shan. So astonished and amazed was Shan that he stuttered, "You didn't do that by yourself, but I must keep my word and I won't harm you."

The next day, Shan gave him another task. "I want you to carve steps from the bottom of the mountain to the top." Yun was perplexed. Build steps? How long was that going to take? How could he do this on his own? Then he remembered the old man. He called out, "Tikki!" and the old man appeared in front of him. "You have called me. What do you need?" Yun again told him everything and the Tikki nodded. "It will be so." As soon as he finished speaking, what had been a rocky and rough path slowly turned into wonderful stone steps extending from the base to the summit. Yun let out a sigh of relief as he walked back to the cave. The mysterious man was nowhere to be seen. That night, when Shan came back, he nodded. "I saw the steps, very impressive. You didn't do that by yourself, but I must keep my word and I won't harm you."

On the last day, Shan gave him another seemingly impossible task. "You must scatter seeds over all the mountains." Yun knew he wouldn't be able to do that on his own, so he called out, "My birds, come to me!" and he heard a cacophony of beating wings as the birds landed at the mouth of the cave. The largest one said, "You have called us. How can we help?" Yun told them what was needed. As a flock of birds flew off, Yun wondered where Shan had been the whole day. How would he have known that Yun hadn't completed the task all by himself?

Shan returned that night, smiling, and said, "Yun, you have a heart of gold and have your head screwed on right. I've been waiting for someone like you to take the challenge of climbing the mountains." Yun looked into the sparkling eyes of Shan and exclaimed, "Rikki and Tikki and all the birds were just you testing me?" "Yes, it was all me," Shan replied with a soft chuckle. "People do not care about the mountains anymore, and I need someone like you to guard them and shelter them from harm of all sorts. I asked you to find the special cow so that you know how to feed yourself. I asked you to build the steps so that it made it easy for you to roam the mountains. I asked you to plant seeds so that life continues to flourish. Yun, will you take care of the mountains for me?" Yun nodded in delight, his eyes brimmed with happy tears. Shan closed his eyes in contentment and off he went in a blue wisp of smoke. Yun stared into the distance at the mountains again, feeling a sense of mission swelling in him.

The Story of Humans and Animals

St. Mary's Canossian College, Shen, Bella – 13

“Right there!”

“Yes! Catch them!”

A bunch of kids ran through the backyard of a mansion, chasing their lions. The lions were scared, running away for their life. When the children caught them, they stood around the lion and sang the “Lion Song”

“ One of the lions doesn’t have a tail,

Two of them don’t have eyes

And the rest don’t have ears,

That’s so strange, that’s so strange.”

The lions looked scared. They were trembling. When the song had finished, the children rushed to the lions. They pulled their tails and ears off, leaving blood all over the floor. Poor lions.

Joe bade farewell to his friends after the game and went back home. It was a steel hemisphere landed on a steel platform, which was floating in the air. Mom was cooking dinner. He told his parents about the game, “ Today we played a really interesting game. My friends pulled the ears and tails of the lions off! It’s really fun!”

Mom replied unhappily, “Joe, lions are precious animals. We shouldn’t do that.”

Joe seemed to realize that he had got into some trouble, so he apologized,” Sorry, mom.z”

Mom sighed, “Well... It’s good for you to know about your own faults. But now, would you also like to go and apologise to the poor lions and..... take them to the doctor living in the Bao Yi mountain?”

Joe thought, “The Bao Yi mountain? There are snakes and fierce animals hiding in the dark at night. It is also misty and mysterious. A number of hikers have got lost recently. How can I go? But..... if I refuse mom’s request, I will probably be punished... I wouldn’t like that.”

And so, Joe agreed. He went to take the lions and slowly walked up the mountain. The lions he was taking care of looked really fragile. It didn’t seem to be lions at all.

Then, he located a hut built by woods and bricks, which looked really different from those in the city. He opened the unlocked door. Then, he saw a young girl, the doctor’s daughter. The girl smiled friendlyly at him and took the lions to the medical room.

Joe told her what happened, and the girl seemed to be displeased with what he had done.

“ All animals are alive. They have feelings..... just like we do,” The girl said, taking out a small animal from a paper box. “This is Vida. Take this, take care of it well. I hope it can teach you a lesson.”

Joe didn’t understand what the girl was saying, but he was happy that he could own a pet. He agreed that he would take good care of the Vida.

Back home, Mom was surprised to see the Vida in Joe’s hands. Joe told Mom everything about what the girl said. Mom was happy about that. She gave Joe a small cage and some food. Joe treated the Vida well.

Mom was pleased as well. She was very happy that someone had educated his son and made him change a lot.

One day, at school, Joe told his classmates about his new Vida. The classmates wanted to see his pet so much and so Joe brought her back to school. His classmates rushed to the Vida, which made it very scared. Joe didn’t realize that this would hurt the Vida. He just felt proud of himself and his pet.

When he got home and took the Vida out of his bag, the Vida looked dizzy and tired. So, Joe brought her back to the mountain.

It was raining torrentially, making the road misty and damp. The large trees shrouded the shadow of Joe. There was no sunshine. There is no light on the mountain. Walking aimlessly, Joe finally saw a mansion. He knocked on the door. A man's voice was projected from the mansion, "Well, I know it would end up like this, but I cannot help. Because you neglected its well-being, it is now sick. How irresponsible you are! Take her back home. I cannot save her."

Joe was depressed. He sat on the floor and cried. The Vida suddenly said, "Free me, Joe."

Joe looked at her and asked, "How can I free you? You are my pet."

The Vida laughed bitterly, "You see, humans keep repeating their faults again and again. They do it over and over. They never understand their faults, and they do it again and again."

Joe didn't understand. The Vida continued, "Let me tell you a story. A thousand years ago, the humans mistreated their pets. They beat them, starved them and even ate them as food, just like what you did to us. As the technology was getting more and more advanced, some scientists started to teach the pets to speak, think and write. They learnt about freedom, and they finally realized that they were mistreated. Then, some of them started a war with humans. Of course, they didn't win for the first time. But they tried twice, three times, four times and they finally succeeded. Most humans were killed by your ancestors, and the rest of them were forced to serve the animals. The animals started to call themselves 'human'. And..... you are an animal, not a human."

The Vida's voice got softer and softer, then disappeared. She held her last breath and sighed. Joe cried because of the death of his pet.

Joe walked down the mountain, going back home. On his way back, the puddle reflected his red eyes and despair face. What the Vida had said was so impressive that he could never forget it. He was both depressed and regretful. As he buried the dead body of the Vida into the damp soil, his heart of arrogance was also forever buried underground.

Beyond the Legends

St. Mary's Canossian College, Wong, Julia – 13

Huangshan, located in China, is one of the most world-famous mountains. It's constantly surrounded by mists and fog. Therefore, many myths were passed on from generations to generations.

There are numerous fascinating scenes on Huangshan, you can view wild spring flowers blossoming in spring; listen and hum to the spectacular waterfalls in summer; enjoy the colourful fall in autumn and touch the falling, translucent snowflakes during winter. The diversity of sceneries of this place at different seasons makes its beauty unique.

There are many legends about this place, one of which is that some ancient Chinese Emperors had ascended to heaven through the “Huangshan entrance gate” while some other Emperors had successfully refined the “pills of immortality” in Huangshan and had risen to the sky from its mountain top. All these placed mystery to Huangshan, which stands towering out majestically in the vicinity.

Local people have a strong belief that Huangshan holds the Earth and heaven apart; it is a gateway through which people can assess their afterlife. The sacred and spiritual mountain has a paradise awaiting them...

Hence, many elderly people, around their age of sixty (before they're too old and lose their walking ability), will embark their journey in search of their new world. They are optimistic to find their destination as no elderly people had ever returned once they headed up the heavenly path.

Mok was a villager living at the foot of Huangshan. As time went by, he found his mobility was impaired because of his constantly aching legs. So, he decided to start his journey up Huangshan before his physical mobility was totally impaired. Mok's grandson named Fai, who is a clingy ten-year old boy, tiptoed and followed Mok out of curiosity, without making a single noise so that his grandfather wouldn't notice him. Mok was especially indispensable to him, since Fai grew up under the meticulous love of Mok.

With the aid of his walking stick, Mok started walking up the mountain. After two hours' walking, Mok arrived at a little stream. The water flowed endlessly from a little slope, and flowed swiftly along the rocks. Everything sounded like a harmonic piece. It was probably Fai's hallucination, but that stream seemed to shimmer. Mok stopped by it and took a generous gulp of the stream water. The gulp of water was amazing, it tasted like nothing else he had ever drunken before, it energised him and his legs didn't seem to ache anymore. Fai felt amazed but he dared not to drink.

Mok then moved on at a quicker speed and arrived at a magnificent “palace”. It was built of red and brown bricks, just like the temples in the village, but the palace was even bigger, and it was extended by several blocks. His grandson followed tightly, making sure that he wouldn't miss out a single sight. Mok was astonished when he saw the security guards of the palace — some weird creatures he had never seen before. Mok had regarded himself as an experienced animal expert for his whole life, but this time, he couldn't even name the two creatures. They were unbelievable. One looked like a lion, but it had pointy horns like rhinos and a hissing tongue like snakes. The other one had slippery skin like salamanders, but it had a pair of snowy-white wings.

Although the creatures didn't look friendly, they didn't stop Mok from the outset. Instead, they beckoned him to come nearer to them. Mok did what they signalled him to do, and then he vaguely heard a voice welcoming him, “Welcome to your new home, my friend...” He gazed in wonder, and slowly, he got attracted by the fountain standing in the middle of the palace. When he looked into the water, the liquid started bubbling, but quickly settled. He then realised that his reflection was completely different. He looked as if he was back in his young thirties, with his wrinkles smoothened, his hair thickened and blackened and his eyes brightened. He thought he might be too tired to get these illusions, so he rubbed his eyes. He then felt the urge of sipping the fountain water, and he irresistibly did so.

What an eye-dropping change! The wrinkles on Mok's face disappeared completely, he felt he was lively and what's more — he started to diminish into the size of a baby in no time. A sudden beam of blue light shed from the sky and raised baby Mok far up into the sky. His grandson, witnessing his grandfather's sudden changes and ascending to the sky, was totally astonished. He gasped slightly in fear "Oh no, grandpa, come back..."; however, that gasp was loud enough to alarm the guards. The salamander-like security guard sprang to action, and promptly grabbed hold of him. Fai screamed, yelled and struggled vigorously, hoping that the creature would let go of him. Fai then started pulling its wings, and surprisingly, the creature vanished, so did the palace, the fountain and the blue light, all have gone in a sudden. Fai, by leaps and bounds, escaped, trying to convince himself that everything he had just seen was not real. He had never wanted to go back home so badly. Fai didn't know how long he had been running, he only felt like centuries. When he finally reached the bottom of the mountain, he fainted out of exhaustion and tiredness.

Hours later, Fai opened his eyes slowly.

He was back in the village, lying on his own cosy bed, with several adults and elders panicking around him.

He rubbed his eyes puzzledly, and whispered in a scary and soft voice: "Where am I?"

"You're safely at home," his mom replied gently, "you fainted somewhere near the mountainside..."

Fai was too eager to solve the mysteries in his head, he stopped his mother, "Mom, where is grandpa? I want to see him now. I followed him up onto the mountain and saw him shrink into a baby and there were some odd creatures, one brought baby grandpa high up to the sky and another even tried catching me, I..."

"Fai, it's just a dream. Now go back to sleep. You must be really tired," his father confronted.

But was it really a dream only? If Fai hadn't gone back to sleep at that time, he would have noticed his mother, silently slipping out the glittering white feather which he didn't even realise he was clutching in his arms. His mom continued whispering and singing a lullaby,

"Sleep my child,

Let it remain,

Forget the wild,

It's just a dream..."

Meanwhile, deep inside the adults, they were astounded as Mok passed away two weeks ago.

And more importantly, it was a taboo not to mention any legends of Huangshan to children before they reached their age of sixteen.

So, did Mok find his afterlife? Also, did Mok purposely look for Fai and lead him towards Huangshan so as to convey special messages to them? Or else how could Fai know about the heavenly place and describe so vividly as to what had happened up in the mountain if nobody has ever mentioned the legends to him?

No matter you believe Fai or not, this is how the myth is passed on even among children nowadays.

Tiger of the Mountains

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Chow, Cheuk Lam – 12

Granny tells me to open the door of our little hut. She says that it must be Daddy who has come, but I don't think so. Daddy never comes, he just calls Granny once in a while and sends us envelopes with money inside. Granny usually says the money is useless and throws it away.

But outside the door is a fat man wearing dark sunglasses. He has several big men beside him, but they don't move. I think they are just for carrying stuff. But I recognize the short man's voice from when Daddy calls back home. It's Daddy!

Granny hobbles out and scowls when she sees him. She yells at him in Chinese. I don't know that much Chinese, but I think Granny is saying rude words and telling him off. Granny never says rude words. Daddy must have been really naughty.

Daddy's smile disappears and he spits on our floor. He says in English that he is taking me out now to see a beautiful place where he will build a house for us to live in together. I say that Granny's house is beautiful already, but he yells at me. I don't want to go with him.

But Daddy grabs me by the hand and tugs me out the door. He tells Granny that we will be back by nightfall.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He has a smile on his face but it's not real. I think he's angry. "We're going to see a nice place in Huangshan, where I will build a big house for you and me, Tommy. It will be better than your precious Granny's house."

"What about Granny?" I ask.

He doesn't answer me and tells me to walk faster. If not, the big men that follow him around will carry me. Except I'm not a baby, I'm seven years old, so I won't be carried that way. I walk faster.

We reach the place that Daddy keeps talking about. My feet are tired but I can keep up because Granny and I walk up the mountain trails every day for exercise. It's a platform on the peaks surrounded by pine trees, their branches twisting into the clouds. It is beautiful like Daddy said. But here is the land of deer and rocks and nature. I don't want to live here. They own this land.

Daddy scowls when I tell him that. He says I have to be more of a man, because "the world is my oyster". But I don't know what oysters are, so I don't understand. And Granny says that I'm a boy, not a man.

He points to the super-tall glass buildings in the city centre. He says that he'll build those buildings here, with a big shopping mall. All with glass, he says, so that everyone can look at the pretty trees. He says that there might be a zoo, and we can catch the animals here to put in cages.

"No!" I blurt, then I remember Daddy doesn't like me saying no. I thought he would be building a bigger type of Granny's wood hut, not a glass monster that's going to crush the trees and the animals. I imagine old trees falling, rabbits and deer jumping through the wood to escape, boulders getting scraped and breaking... I tell Daddy that, but he laughs in my face.

"Now Tommy, it's just a small part of the mountains. The animals can go somewhere else."

I think, *why should the animals go away to make room for us? It's their home.* But I don't say it, because Daddy seems mad.

We eat lunch on the platform which Daddy keeps calling "our property", then Daddy takes me by the hand and we walk around "our property".

I keep telling Daddy that we shouldn't build our house there. Granny's house is big enough for all of us. Then he says the big men always following him around have to live in the same house as we do, to protect us. But I don't like having them around.

Then Daddy says it's time to go. The big men gather up everything and march us down. It starts out okay. But after a while, even I can see that we're not going the same way as we did coming up.

"I remember a twisty pine tree," I say to Daddy. "Right beside the rushing waterfall. We haven't been here before."

Daddy frowns and pulls my arm hard. That's how I know that I've said something wrong. He talks to the big men who are leading us, but they point at the map and say we're going in the right way.

I pull on Daddy's sleeve. "Daddy, I remember that rock. It has a star-shaped hole in it. We've seen it a lot of times before."

Daddy turns to whisper to the tall men again. Then a man slashes the rock with a knife. I'm not fast enough to stop him. I look at the ugly wound in the middle of the rock and I want to cry, but then Daddy glares at me.

We keep walking.

The big men make marks into every tree or rock that they pass, and I can't help but watch the scars disappear behind us. But then we pass the marks again.

And again.

And again once more.

But the men still keep putting marks into everything they pass. Soon the first tree they slashed through has five huge splits in it, marking the five times that we've passed that tree.

I sit down because Daddy's not listening. "Daddy, you made the mountains angry. They won't forgive you this time, that's why they're leading us around in circles. "

Daddy scowls at me and one of the big men scoops me up like a baby. But I know that the mountains will punish them.

Then we finally go down into a rocky valley that we haven't gone down before. Daddy's looks hopeful that we'll finally get out, but I know it is a trap.

The valley is a dead end. It leads to a dark cave that nobody wants to go into. Daddy turns back with a sigh and starts shouting at the big men who have been leading us.

I see the orange shadow first. It is a tiger, half-hidden by the bushes around the cave. Then it leaps out and fastens its jaws around the biggest of the men.

The man holding me drops me and I run to the tiger. It's impossible! There are no tigers here and no healthy tiger would eat humans — it must be the mountains. The mountains are enraged. I don't know what I'm doing, but I know that I can help.

The big man yells and falls, but I can see that there is no blood. The tiger has not hurt him. I touch the tiger's head, and it turns and looks at me with those burning green eyes. I'm terrified, but I keep stroking its fur and looking at the tiger. "I know you are peaceful," I whisper to it, "I know you were sent by the mountains. We have learnt our lesson, we will go."

The tiger's stare doesn't waver. I am scared for a second, and then it blinks and turns, prowling back into the cave. It turns back and roars as a farewell, and then disappears.

The big man stares at his arm. It is not bleeding, not even bruised. I knew the tiger did not want to hurt us.

Daddy goes over to me. I hope he knows that the mountains wanted to punish him, but they forgave us instead of killing us here.

"Let's leave —" Daddy says, out of breath. "Let's leave this horrible place, right now."

We somehow make our way out of the mountains. It's nighttime already. We go to Granny's house, and Daddy stays there. He mentions nothing of our trip into the mountains for a few days.

In those few days, life returns to normal. I help Granny harvest our fields, and Daddy sometimes helps out. I play with the other children, who are also from the outskirts of the city. I think Daddy is happier here.

Then one day I come home from helping in the fields and Daddy is gone, replaced by a note in his handwriting.

Dear Tommy,

I have decided to cancel the house that I was going to build on Huangshan. I won't build the shopping mall as well. I have decided to sell my business and retire with you and Granny. If Granny allows, I want to live in your house to retire.

Thank you for teaching me about nature.

Love, daddy.

I show Granny the letter. She says that Daddy has learnt his lesson. We decide to eat a celebratory dinner tonight.

Before I go inside for dinner, I see a glimpse of orange fur and green eyes, prowling back to the mountains of its home.

The Emperor's Word

St. Paul's Convent School, Au, Cheuk Kiu Agnes – 13

"Does anyone know why 'Yishan' became 'Huangshan'?"

No one responded to Miss Chan. Most students were half asleep, some were secretly on their iPads, and a small fraction was doing unrelated homework.

"Fine, then, I'll tell this story. I expect all of you to listen closely!"

With that, Miss Chan started telling her story. I wasn't sure what she said – by the time she'd started droning on, my eyelids slowly shut, and I felt drowsiness sweep through me...

"Yishan...is this really the right place, Fuchu Gong?"

"Of course, my emperor. Look at this wondrous view!"

People's muddled voices echoed around me. As I opened my eyes, I found myself in a deep, dark cave. It felt freezing in my thin uniform. I huddled up and looked around for light. I saw some blurry figures move towards me. The leading man approached me and spoke.

"Are you okay, child?"

"Where am I? Ugh, it's so cold..." I bit my icy lip and tried to huddle tighter as I shivered helplessly.

"Men, help this poor child. He must have hit his head." Under his order, his men hurried over and wrapped robes around me.

As they fussed over me, the man crouched down with pitiful eyes and explained, "We're looking for a land of alchemy to make the elixir of life. Once you take it, you will never grow old. Would you like to join us?"

It took me a few seconds to process what he just said. Laughing, I blurted, "Sir, I'm pretty sure immortality is a myth. 'Elixir of life'? What caveman thinking...I must've been transported to the past."

One of the leader's men gave me a sharp glare. "Don't you dare speak to our emperor Huang Di like that!"

Emperor? Shocked, I looked back to the leader. I knew I was somehow in ancient China, but coming face to face with the emperor was an even greater surprise.

"You must've hit your head pretty hard! It's okay, Rong Chengzi. I understand if you don't want to join us. You can stay in this cave. We'll keep going."

During the few minutes I've been in this darned cave, I've developed nothing but disdain for it. Besides, the thought of being left alone was scary. "I...I'll go with you."

The emperor smiled kindly. As everyone helped me up, I felt a sweetness in my heart – I haven't been smiled to like this in such a long time.

As we left the cave, I stopped to gaze at this wonderland – the hills seemed to go on and on forever, the clouds moved aimlessly across the sky, the trees and grass were the greenest green I'd ever seen...what a strange and spectacular sight!

Wandering at the foot of the Yishan, we didn't go far before we stopped in front of a lake. Its alluring atmosphere drew us closer. I scooped up a handful of water – it felt warm to my cold hands. "This must be the heavenly lake!" Someone exclaimed. "If you say so, Fuchu Gong, then it must be true!" Everyone grew excited and suggested Huang Di to take a dip, so he took off his clothes and jumped into the lake. "My muscles and bones feel relaxed already!" Hearing this, everyone else joined him. Fuelled by curiosity, I joined them as well.

After that short break, we left refreshed and motivated. As we walked further, Huang Di sniffed the air. "What a strong and mellow fragrance! It must be good wine!" The men scurried around, seeking eagerly. Moments later, someone found the wine in a stone trough. Rong Chengzi took a sip and cried, "Immortal wine!" Everyone immediately took turns drinking. "Would you like some?" Rong Chengzi's eyes were less ferocious as he looked at me this time. "No thanks, I'm underage..." Rong Chengzi's frowned, but shrugged and continued drinking. The scent of wine wafting through the air was truly tempting, but the thought of getting drunk held me back.

After what seemed like forever, we finally found the land of alchemy to make the elixir of life. "Hurray! We can become immortal now!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. I didn't believe the myth earlier, but the mystical ambience enveloping us changed my beliefs. Besides, we'd trekked Yishan for so long, something in return was to be expected.

"We still have to build the platform and furnace. We also need wood and ingredients for the elixir."

Everyone groaned and grumbled. After some discussion, Fuchu Gong and Rong Chengzi took responsibility of the alchemical platform and furnace. Most others chopped wood. The rest of us, including me, were led by Huang Di to find the ingredients of the elixir.

It felt like another 10 years had passed as we hiked across Yishan, cluelessly looking for ingredients, so Huang Di started a conversation.

"How old are you, child?"

"I'm 12...so, and I say this respectfully...emperor, could you not call me 'child'?"

I realised how rude I sounded. Instead of breaking a fuse, though, Huang Di only chuckled.

"12 is still very young! You still have your entire life ahead of you!"

"It doesn't matter! Life is so stressful, I don't think I'll survive these tough, unbearable years..."

"We all have our toughest moments. It's getting through them that makes us stronger! And it's getting stronger that allows us to keep moving forward."

I clicked my tongue as he lectured me. I found it irritating for a man born with a golden spoon in his mouth from thousands of years ago to be teaching me how to live my life.

Soon, we ran out of food. People began leaving, not wanting to continue this pointless search. Eventually, I was the only one left with him...and I wanted to leave, too.

As I dragged my feet forward, I suddenly felt a sharp prickle in my foot. "Ouch!"

"Are you okay?" Huang Di crouched down and examined my foot. There was unwavering determination in his eyes...and the same pity that was present when we first met. His expression annoyed me. *He* made me struggle and suffer for *himself*.

"I'm done!" I yelled. He shrank away from me in shock. "You've caused me so much pain and trouble. I don't want to help you anymore!"

His determination became sadness. "But...once we take the elixir, we'll become immortal! We can work through our toughest times together. We—"

"Enough! Stop talking!" I clasped my hands over my ears and squeezed my eyes shut. "My whole body hurts, and it's all thanks to you. I don't want you here! Leave me alone!"

For a moment, there was only silence. Then, I heard Huang Di's feet as he rose, turned, and continued on, alone.

With heavy steps and a heavy heart, I limped to a nearby cave and tended my wound. I was clothed and only a bit hungry, but I felt colder and more defeated than I ever had. As I huddled up again, our memories of the journey across Yishan ran through my mind. I remembered his kind smile, the cozy bath in the lake, the laughter we shared as we drank the wine...and I couldn't get what Huang Di said out of my head. That I could get through tough moments and become stronger. That he would do it alongside me.

I started crying unstoppably. Crying tears of regret, guilt and shame.

I must return to his side, I thought. He's done so much for me. I've been so ungrateful.

With newfound strength, I left the cave, making my way back to the land of alchemy. To my dismay, a large group was already surrounding Huang Di, Fuchu Gong and Rong Chengzi. They took the elixir together and rose from the ground, departing for the heavens.

"Wait! Don't leave me!" I barrelled my way through the crowd, reaching where Huang Di once stood. With a charged leap, I latched onto his leg, sighing in relief as I rose with him. "I'm sorry, Huang Di! I—"

Huang Di violently shook his leg. "Let go of me!" I looked up into his harsh, unforgiving eyes. "You didn't earn this. Go live with those disgusting, greedy scoundrels!"

My hand slipped and I fell. *Let me die*, I thought depressingly, unable to swallow the tight knot in my throat. *I deserve every bit of this.*

As I hit the ground, immense pain spread through my body. My limbs slowly froze, turning to stone. Suddenly, I felt a hard hit on my head.

I opened my eyes to see Miss Chan, her eyes as piercing as daggers. "Sleeping in my class? How dare you!"

I felt dampness around my eyes. My classmates snickered under their breath at my tears, but my heart wasn't in the classroom.

From that day on, I swore to never abandon the people I have the privilege of working hard with. We all have our toughest moments, but getting through them together makes us stronger, and getting stronger allows us to keep moving forward.

The Old Lady by the Moon

St. Paul's Convent School, Chan-Combrink, Tjie Lam Isabella – 14

It is well-known that hand-in-hand with ancient places come the ancient legends interwoven within them. Surely enough, there is no older legend than the one surrounding the mountains of the Yellow Emperor, a place that transcends the time of gods, seemingly almost as old as time itself. Every time I return to my roots, I am transfixed by its breathtaking scenery; misty skies I can never quite manage to capture with a paintbrush, a sunrise that cracks the heavens open as if enticing me to go beyond just to see how impossibly wondrous it must look on the other side, sun-soaked cliffs and lush forest greens and plunging cliffs at dizzying heights that knock the air out of my lungs.

Each time, I drown in the wave of nostalgia that overwhelms me, saltwater washing into my bleeding wounds and reminding me how time never healed them. Like the waves to the shore, I always return here no matter how often I am sent away, my persistence an infinite well. The legend is subdued, now, nothing more than a near-forgotten folktale mothers hiss to their children to threaten them into behaving. 'If you don't stop misbehaving, the old lady living on the mountains will come and steal you away,' I hear an exhausted mother snap to her child. I've heard countless versions of the tale, and I'm not surprised it's morphed into this; from a woman selling herbs to a goddess of the mountains to an old lady who will steal naughty children away if they dare disobey their parents.

The child quiets down. 'I'm sorry,' I ask the mother, who turns to me, harried and frenzied with fever-bright eyes. 'I'm new here.' The lie slips past my tongue as smoothly as running water. 'I'm studying the folklore of this village. Do you mind telling me more about this old lady?'

The mother bites her lip. I realize too late that I've put her in an uncomfortable situation of having to expose her threat as nothing but a myth in front of her child. She eventually settles on clamping the child's ears before speaking to me. 'There have been many variations of this myth,' she tells me, 'but they all share some similarities, which happen to be an old, immortal lady living in the Huangshan mountain range. The legend stems from the old emperor, Huangdi, who used the herbs from the mountain to make an elixir that would render himself immortal as long as he kept drinking it every few years. People say that's what the old lady did. The way everyone interprets her purpose is different— we parents use her as a last resort to get our kids to behave, but I know some old men who claim to know the true legends about her. They live just down that street, if you want to see them.'

There's no need. I only want to know how the legend has evolved over time. Still, I thank her, and continue on my way after purchasing a basket of fruit so ripe my mouth waters at the sight.

The legend has died down over time, as most things tend to do. The old lady has not been sighted in decades. However, the tradition of passing terrific myths and astonishing stories through lullabies sung gently, bedtime stories whispered lovingly and folk tales narrated grandly beside a roaring fire is one as old as time, and I know the old lady will not be forgotten. Her presence is etched bone-deep into the history of the mountains, with no torrential rain or unforgiving storm or crackling thunder able to erode it away.

With every step I take, with every breath I inhale, the memories come rushing back to me dizzily quickly, making me lightheaded with giddiness. There is no feeling like coming back home, no feeling remotely comparable to the adrenaline rush that is setting reverent foot in a place you know better than yourself. Despite the fact that I haven't been here for centuries, the winding paths are as familiar as breathing, the rocks as craggy as ever, the wind stinging my face like whips and the cold air burning my lungs stirring memories buried deep within the marrow of my bones. My joints are old, have been old longer than I can recall, but I'm still able to climb up jagged rock and balance on dark, smooth stones. You don't forget where to place your feet.

The fact that I've been gone for so long does not seem to stop the mountains from existing. I half-expected them to hold their breath for my return, stop time until I came home with a basket of overripe fruit and a souvenir from

across the world. But the mountains have continued to exist without me, uncaring. They do not stop to flinch at my pain, mourn for my departure. The world turns on its axis, the sun rises and sets, and the fog continues to roll into the Huangshan mountains, serene and beautiful and unsympathetic. It's sunset now, and the sky is smeared with violent hues of crimson red and fiery orange in some parts, streaked with delicate gold in others. The sun itself looks ripe and overflowing, like the tomato in my basket, as if it's about to split itself in half. Finally, it does, and the reds bleed across the horizon like a river of blood running across the outlines of the mountains that stand starkly upwards, a firm grey obscuring the bleeding sunset, acting as my last protection against the temptation to go further and see what lies beyond the sun.

However, it's not my time yet. I've stolen and borrowed and begged for so much more time on this earth, and I know to let that go to waste would be to let my life's aspirations spiral down the drain. I've travelled nearly everywhere on earth, have been able to witness the rise of empires and the downfall of entire civilizations. Foreign languages haven't felt strange on my tongue for a long time.

Still, I've yet to find a place that can surpass the beauty of the mountains of the Yellow Emperor. Perhaps I'm biased. Perhaps it's because this is my home, and a slum to a peasant would evoke more fondness and nostalgia than a palace would. But I can say for certain that this is no slum. It is nightfall, and the moonbeams fall with such an easy grace over the mountains with edges so sharp and dramatic that it doesn't take one with a vivid imagination to envision that they seem to have clawed their way up violently from the depths of the earth itself, pushing through no matter what hardships they faced along the way, the struggles shaping their surfaces into the kind of exquisitely beautiful things poets would devote their entire lives to putting into words.

Not for the first time, the sudden understanding of how people can spend their whole lives admiring just one thing grips my heart like a vice. I'm perched precariously upon a rock, eating a tangerine, and never have I felt more at peace than right this moment, while the iridescent moon is shining through the overhead tree branches and the air is heavy with solitude and quiet. I've never understood what it means to worship something more than I do when I'm staring out across the Huangshan mountains.

Slowly, I rise to my feet, feeling like one misstep on a broken branch could dispel the quiet blanket that has settled over the mountains. I feel as if I am in a temple, and stay carefully silent so as not to disturb the prayers whispered by the rustling leaves to the moon. My feet tread feather-light across the winding path until I reach the top of the mountain, where an ancient hut stands. It looks like it could be blown away at any moment, but appearances can be deceiving. It's stayed sturdy for centuries, now.

I enter the house and empty my basket of fruit out on the table. I cannot stay for long. There are new places to see, new countries to explore, new cultures to experience. The cage of nostalgia is comforting, but it is still a cage.

Taking the empty basket outside, I bend down to pluck the herbs from the ground, herbs that only grow on the tallest tips of the Huangshan mountain range. I will need to make my elixir tomorrow, as I have already delayed this trip for far too long— I can feel my bones threatening to give out on me. For now, the villagers can look skyward, and see if they can spot a little old lady backlit by the moonlight, plucking herbs to brew her elixir of immortality. Maybe that will restore their faith in folktales.

For now, I watch the moon shine over the Huangshan mountains, and feel contentment settle within my bones.

Tales From China's Magical Mountains

St. Paul's Convent School, Cheung, Wing Ning – 13

Thin layers of murky clouds masked the full moon, stars have become remote pinpricks. Adverting my gaze to the faraway misty mountains, haze floated surrounding it like smoke from a doused fire. Conversely to the heavenly appearance of the mystical mountains, the uncertainty terminated the thoughts of people investigating this mystery. The dim moonlight seems to cast a metallic—silver veil over the Jade amulet worn around my neck. The amulet was exquisitely carved with China's divine guardians of the dragon and the phoenix, it was the only object mother bequeathed to me before she vanished. Tears shimmered in my eyes while I gently whispered "Mother, it has been five years since you left. Is seeking the unrevealed secret of the mountains worth it for you to risk your life?"

Ever since the departure of Mother, the empire has transformed into a complete catastrophe. The decisive leader converted into a tyrant, prosperity and peace were broken by cataclysmic battles and disastrous natural hazards. Exceptionally, the mountains appeared to be vibrating more vigorously than ever. An uncanny sensation instantly filled my mind: May this chaos be associated with the truth hidden behind the magical mountains? After all these years of abstaining from the nightmare of losing her, is this fate informing me to accomplish her desire? I lowered my head, clenched my fists, beneath the dark solemn eyes of a thirteen-year-old girl, hides the determination of extricating China from danger.

Without hesitation, I swiftly shoved my belongings and acupuncture tools into a dusty bag and advanced to the mountains. After trekking an arduous route for the whole day, exhaustion persuaded me to search for an inn. Adjacent to the inn, there was an unlighted passageway. Amid the alley, There lied a person in rags and tatters, shivering with blood oozing out of his head. As an acupuncturist, I sterilized his skin and inserted needles into his acupoints to treat both manifestation and the root cause of disease. Eventually, he rubbed his eyes open.

"Are you awake? How do you feel?" I articulated.

His face was as white as a piece of blank paper, contrasting the bruises beneath his eyelids. His seducing ivory black eyes revealed his alertness and franticness towards me. Still, he pursed his lips, refusing to respond in disdain. He was observing the room until his gaze fixed, contemplating at the glittering and translucent jade amulet around my neck. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and hope, breaking the silence, he parted his lips and muttered in a hoarse voice:

"Did you rescue me?" He enunciated unhurriedly.

"Practically yes." I plastered a beam on my face.

"May I introduce myself, I'm Yang." His dark eyes radiated a fierce, uncompromising intelligence while he voiced out.

"Yue," I responded calmly.

"Are you the guardian goddess of the mystic mountains, Yue?" He queried, lifting an eyebrow to show his curiosity."

"Guardian goddess? What do you mean by it, Yang?" My face contorted with perplexity.

He looked at me with a strangled expression, his vision narrowed to a pinprick, he shook his head helplessly with a forced grin and deeply exhaled "Legend has that the existence of China's divine guardians, the devoted couple of Dragon and Phoenix had been recognized there. The Phoenix fancies tranquility and a harmonious life. Contradictory, Dragon's ambition was to conquer the universe. To halt the occurrence of this, Phoenix allied the

divines and pixies to clash the thunderous dragon. They managed to trounce Dragon, however, combatants endured terrible sacrifices, none survived except the guardian goddess and Phoenix. The guardian goddess was the captain and commander, whilst she didn't die, she was apprehended by the dragon. Before her dissipation, she accorded her destructive powers in the jade amulet which you are wearing, declaring to Phoenix that the one possessing the amulet becomes the succeeding guardian goddess. Yue, you're the chosen one, there's no survival chance of this impracticable mission."

"Then I'm going to make the impossible possible!" My eyes flared with persistence and resoluteness.

"Since you've saved my life, I'm coming with you!" He gradually stood up. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he embraced me with his warm hands. My cheeks flushed, I could hear my furious heart thudding and pound intensively for no reason. Posterior to that cuddle, we would vacate the day after and resume on the expedition.

Sun was sinking toward the horizon, casting a slight canary yellow light through. In all of a sudden, the crisp climate modified into a blistering wave of torridity. I squeezed my eyes shut with my brows knitted, it was extraordinarily flaming that exhaling had become strenuous. Surprisingly, Yang's hands tightened into fists, the gleam from his crow-black eyes faded until his eyes transformed dark and vacant. When the hundred-degree heat, flaming sun, and parching salt was reduced, I fluttered my lashes and cleared my vision, an extensive bird with brilliant scarlet and gold plumage stood in front of us: It was Phoenix.

Egotistically, the phoenix flapped his wings and proclaimed "Speak, what brings you here to the mystical mountains?"

"Your highness, I'm Yue this is Yang, I believe you recognize this amulet." I demonstrated the gleaming jade amulet facing her.

"My, salutations to our Guardian Goddess, the magical mountains are in agony!" She impatiently exclaimed.

"Millions of years ago, the Guardian Goddess positioned boundaries to imprison the dragon. Despite the sedateness and peacefulness for years, the boundaries appear to lose effectiveness, consequently causing the mountains to tremble aggressively due to the revival of our worst horror: the undefeatable dragon." She gave a mirthless laugh, then portentously apprised me "The dragon has grown more uncontrollable by devouring human's affectionate side of their souls, remaining the immoral and iniquitous side of your species, explaining why China is in chaos. Yue, you're our only and final hope to prevent the destruction of the universe, you must succeed even the price to be paid must be expensive."

"What's the price paid behind? And how exactly do I activate the amulet's power, your highness?" I was on tenterhooks to take into consideration, Phoenix was just about to pronounce her words when Yang interrupted in his exasperate but doting tone "It is an unknown, don't be vexatious though, I'm sure you'll succeed." He shrugged and gave me a crooked smile that melted my heart like ice-cream. We gazed deeply into each other's eyes until Phoenix awkwardly broke the moment and projected her voice "Ahem! Time flies Yue, you better get equipped and prepared as the dragon would probably emerge soon."

Instantaneously, there was a teeny crack on the surface of the mountains, the crevice merged greater and greater. The mountain was shuddering and palpitating as an influential volcanic eruption. The sky was quick with sudden glares with a distant flash of lightning, gloominess enveloped the skies instantly. I grasped on the sword Phoenix gave me tightly, while my eyes glinted with volitional perseverance. A fearsome creature with glittering saffron scales, phenomenal fiery breath with sharpened claws and razor-sharp teeth arose from the bottom of the mountains.

With an imperious countenance, a cunning smirk, and manipulative eyes. Dragon rampantly hollered “Phoenix, you won the previous battle, but this time.....” He glanced ponderingly at me and Yang respectively “My faithful apprentice and I will govern the whole China and defeat you betrayer!” He continued his claim unhurriedly with a villainous grin “What do you say my faithful apprentice, or should I say, Yang?”

I shook my head in disbelief, breathing has become like hyperventilating, I opened my mouth slightly but found no words to say, there was only dispiritedness and disappointment in my eyes. Yang gazed at me sincerely “I’m sorry, it was I who led you here.” He paused for seconds “Master, you’ve once said phoenix betrayed you, how about counting another betrayal from me?” His glance towards me, as conspiratorial as a wink, signaled the start of this protracted war.

Sweat stung my eyes like venom, dripping down like a waterfall, stimulating my injuries. Pain from numerous wounds barely register, fresh blood was exuding from the scratches on my face. I gritted my teeth and shook my head ferociously, the dragon seemed to be invincible, each assault would only arouse his temptation to kill us, without a vital attack, there’s wasn’t any chance of winning. I stared thoughtfully at my amulet and puffed “Would the destructive power trapped inside help? Should we try activating it, Yang?” He suspired harshly “This is the only choice left then, farewell my beloved Yue. The only way of activating the jade amulet is straightforward, and that is by sacrifice!” Unexpectedly, he gripped onto my sword with his bloody, bare hands, the blade of the sword headed towards Yang bit by bit. I cried my eyes out, howling desperately “NOOOO!” I sued all might to pull the sword away from him, but it emphatically went in his direction. With all his strength, he showed me his alluring smile and stabbed himself brutally in the center of his heart. Flames of wrath raged furiously in my pupils, inflaming the detestation of the death of Yang and the vanish of Mother. The jade amulet released its devastating destruction power, it was so intense that the dragon was ignited into ashes.

After the tough battle, the strength of my limbs faded, I hopelessly crawled towards his body. Tears uncontrollably fell from my swollen eyes. I hid my face beneath my blood-soaked hands. Yes, I would be crowned the heroine, who was capable of defeating the treacherous enemy, restoring tranquility to the kingdom by freeing the captured souls, and rescuing her own mother.

“It seems like I owned everything, including fame, wealth, reputation.” I sighed with bitterness. However, genuinely none knew behind the success of this thirteen-year-old warrior, she has lost her “only one” forever.....

Tales From China's Magical Mountains

St. Paul's Convent School, Chiu, Ellie – 13

As Li Bai raised his gaze towards the magnificent Huangshan that emerged from the Heavenly River like nine beautiful lotus flowers, his two wing-like flaps that flanked his black hat fluttered in the breeze. In a perpetual state of curiosity and wonder, his gleaming eyes marvelled at each masterpiece — extraordinary rock pillars that shot up to kiss the heavens above.

“Why, it is as if a lake of empyrean lilies were flourishing amid a sea of gold,” he murmured under his breath.

Stroking his impeccably kept whiskers that sprouted from below his bulbous nose, he stared down at his ration of liquor in his gourd that was meant to last him the long and arduous journey ahead of himself. “Nevermind,” he sighed, realizing he only had a few remaining sips left, “I have the scenic wonders around me to keep me company.”

After all, he had promised himself to locate the mythical jade caves in the heart of the granite mountains that were rumoured to have been fashioned by the hand of the mythical Yellow Emperor himself. He yearned to gaze upon the glittering and glistening emerald stone to further inspire his poetry.

As Li Bai scaled the narrow, meandering pathways, he marvelled at the sight of the swirling mists that resembled the back of a dragon, gradually thickening into a heavenly river of pillowy white.

“How do the pine trees flourish in this harsh terrain of beige and walnut brown?” he mused before reclining in the soothing, serene shades of one verdant umbrella that sprouted from the side of a cliff face.

Unexpectedly, the wind greeted Li Bai, and its powerful breath caused his loose-fitting garments to billow like white and blue sails. From the corner of Li Bai's eyes, a precious stone glimmered and protruded from under his foot. The tips of Li Bai's thick eyebrows rose upwards as he examined the precious gem. “Finally...,” Li Bai exhaled with disbelief.

Following the trail of light blueish green mineral rock embedded in the granite ground, Li Bai soon found himself standing before a cavernous mouth of the splendid jade cave concealed in the heart of the Lotus Mountain.

Li Bai was so transfixed by his discovery that he took no notice of the darkening sky and a lurking shadow that had been trailing him for miles. Li Bai was being surreptitiously followed by a blood-thirsty spy, ToFu, who had been sent at the behest of the avaricious consort of Emperor Xuanzong, Yang Gui Fei and the corrupt Li Linfu family. Having caught wind of Li Bai's endeavours, they had him followed to see if he knew of the whereabouts of the coveted treasure trove.

The air suddenly grew damp and chilly, and silver arrows began to fall from the inky sky, prompting Li Bai to take shelter in the heavenly cave before him. As he descended into the jade heaven, the pitter-pattering of rainfall gradually dissipated.

Magically, the walls of the cave illuminated in the darkness, emitting an ethereal glow of gentle jade green. Li Bai was so arrested by majestic splendour that it was only until he felt ToFu's hot breath against the nape of his neck that it dawned on him, he realized that his life was in jeopardy.

Slowly, Li Bai turned around to face a trained assassin. Tofu's eyes narrowed as his mouth upturned mischievously.

“Ha!” Tofu licked his leering lips. “Now that you've led me here, you have served your purpose!” His dagger was poised to plunge into Li Bai's rapidly beating heart.

Li Bai's face blanched. "Please...good sir, I mean you no harm."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't slit your throat!"

"My friend..." Li Bai protested with his hands raised, "I do not wish to take any of this jade... It's yours if that is what you want – "

"Yes! And I'll have it after I cut out your heart!" Tofu hissed, his eyes wild and glinting as he took a step closer towards his target.

As ToFu thrust his glinting dagger forward, Li Bai's cloth shoes slipped on the satin-smooth ground, causing him to stumble backwards.

Narrowly missing the maniac's knifing, Li Bai hastily scrambled towards the mouth of the cave and out into the slicing rain, desperate to escape the clutches of death. The heavens were weeping with greater ferocity, and the surface run-off water caused Li Bai to slip and slide along the slick ground – all the way to the edge of the sheer precipice.

Lightning wriggled through the skies like a rip in a stormy blanket of grey, hiding the clouds in its blinding radiance. The loud noise reverberated and echoed throughout the Huangshan mountains.

As Li Bai peered anxiously down the steep drop before him, drenched sods began to flake and chunks of rocks crumbled from under his toes. Blood roared in his ears as adrenaline raced through his veins like a frightened carp, navigating perilous channels of brackish water. Behind him, the dreaded killing machine encroached, and it was only a matter of time before he would sink his fatal dagger into Li Bai's back.

Falling to his knees and tears streaking down his cheeks, Li Bai flung his arms upwards towards the heavens and pleaded, "Oh Almighty Gods, please have mercy on my soul!"

"Ah-ha!" the lecherous voice of his nemesis rang in the air ominously.

Without looking back, Li Bai leaned forward and allowed the weight of his body to plunge into the bottomless void, the abyss of doom, and as he fell from the precipice of Jade Mountain, he cried, "Evil shall not prevail!"

Taken aback by Li Bai's unexpected actions, the villain stood in the incessant rain. Churlish clouds spat great gouts of water, falling in chaotic drops as if it was to flush away relentless Tofu. The wind hit his face, clinging his long hair towards it.

At that precise moment, the menacing clouds began to retreat, and shards of brilliant sunlight swept across the majestic summit. Unbeknownst to all, from the swirling mists, a mythical beast with scarlet horns and clad in shimmering gold scales emerged — its fierce eyes burning like red-hot coals, seething at the injustice committed against an innocent. Swish. Swish. The serpent's tremendous fiery tail propelled the legendary creature forward. Its undulating ridged spines scintillating in the strengthening sunlight, as it glided effortlessly across the Huangshan peaks with its amber whiskers pointed in direction of the assailed.

A split second before Li Bai's body smashed into the rocky ground below, the dragon swooped down and caught Li Bai on its back, gracefully breaking his fatal fall. Feeling that his lips were stretching wider into a gaping grin, he peeked over the horizons and carefully stroked the dragon's scales as it rushed up the steep precipice.

As it approached nefarious Tofu, the fiery dragon unsheathed its hawk-like claws and snapped open its jaw to bare its fangs. At once, a torrent of flames came bursting from its gaping mouth, reducing Tofu to a heap of ash.

As the last clouds parted to reveal the brilliant and glow of the sun, the majestic beast gracefully landed at the mouth of the majestic jade cave, allowing Li Bai to disembark. Dropping to his hands and knees and bowing deeply until his forehead kissed the ground, Li Bai graciously thanked the ancient king for saving his life and wrote a short poem and recited in praise of the yellow emperor,

“I talk about heavenly Huangshan Mountains,
Admiring its varying deeps of cloud.
Pines lure me, rocks ease me.
Dragons, tempestuous on the mountains and clad in rainbow garments
Darken clouds with the darkness of rain,
And paint it white again.
It saves me from the clutches of evil,
Breaking my fatal fall towards the bottomless pit
And carrying me to the heavens.
My soul goes flying,
Are the lost clouds I was in.
Swiftly, I shall take my leave of you, not knowing for how long.
But let me ride on you, great dragon, when I have need of you. ”

The reputation of the poet Li Bai has spread all over the world, but it is still a mystery whether the dragon has existed.

Find Your Home

St. Paul's Convent School, Chow, Hiu Hang Kaitlyn – 14

There is a legend that has started thousands of years ago in a village, Castrum, that anybody who successfully climbed the Mountain would be able to obtain the deepest desire of the seeker. There was only one mountain in Castrum, and at night the Mountain seemed to rattle with horrors and treasures alike. The legend has existed for so long, so long...

Long ago, there was a young man who climbed the Mountain. His name was Blaine Sherman Yancheng Victor which was a rather long name for such a short man in his early thirties. Since Blaine was young, he had never blended in with the children in Castrum. When the fighting lessons were held, children fought among themselves. 'You kids are future warriors. Find your home, Castrum! Our nation!' The teacher would declare, throwing his hands up to the sky. But Blaine didn't really care about fighting with other village tribes. He didn't understand what the teacher said.

Find your home.

He didn't want to be in Castrum. He should've been born somewhere else, somewhere he could be accepted as who he was. He thought of the mountains, high above the clouds. There, he could be free.

The mountain would give him what he wanted.

Months later, he packed everything he needed to stay alive on the mountain. He planned to finish climbing it in a day, and claim his victory.

The hike was mostly flat for the first minute, so flat that Blaine didn't realise he was walking up at all. Then, in front of him rose a steep cliff. He stepped onto the first foothold he could see and grabbed onto whatever climbing plant was growing above him. He pulled himself up, up, up, until there was a small ledge that he could rest on for a while. He leaned on it, his feet on a blunt stone that jutted out, feeling exhausted. He'd brought water with him, but he didn't want to risk drinking all of it.

Snap.

A branch of the climbing plant snapped. He was now fully aware of the danger that lay under him. He couldn't die now, not that he had to climb up to the top. The thought of death propelled him. He let go of the climbing plant, and instead held onto the many crevices of the cliff that had caused him fright mere hours ago. He climbed up, and up. Suddenly, he found that the cliff was caving in like a door that opened on the top.

He found himself falling down into complete darkness as he held on to the cliff. Who would even build so many traps here?

Blaine's hands were sweating as he stared into the darkness, fearing that there were more to come. He didn't want an adventure, he wanted the reward. With a thundering *thud*, the cliff fell into the large cavern. Half dead with fear, Blaine stood up and continued to venture deeper into the mountain.

Blaine kicked a stone along as he walked deeper. He didn't want to waste his firewood and his matches—he couldn't. He had walked for so long that even the large opening, in which sunlight had streamed through, became too far to see. He didn't know whether it was night or day.

He stuck out his foot to kick the stone again. The stone fell, and Blaine heard it hit against the other side of the hole before falling. This time, Blaine knew he had to light a torch to see what was happening. He struck his match against the matchbox, then lit a dry twig. Holding it as far away from his face as possible, he held it towards the floor.

The depth of the hole stunned him. One more step and he would've fallen into the dark hole that seemed to have no end. It was too big for his stone to fly over to the other side to hit it. The sound he heard must've been the sound of his stone hitting the bottom. Where was the bottom?

Gingerly, he lowered himself into the hole using a rope. His fingers were already bloody and raw from the climb; now it was smeared on his rope, too. He grimaced. He wouldn't be able to fix it before going back to Castrum. This was when he realised that his knuckles ached and his knees hurt, too.

He let himself fall. His hands hurt too much to hold anything, and the rope dangled and swung from side to side as he let go. He hit the floor, managing to stay conscious enough to see what was happening. A man with exceedingly long hair with a straight beard wearing a long robe approached Blaine. Blaine sat up quickly, trying to move away from the madman as quickly as he could. But he couldn't move. His feet had multiple scratches and cuts on them, and his left knee had split open. He looked at his hands. They were bloodier than he last remembered them.

Holding a white feather fan that he fanned himself using his left hand, the madman approached him and poked his back a couple of times. 'Stop it! You're killing me!' Blaine wanted to yell, but instead, he felt like he was under a spell that froze him so he couldn't talk. He couldn't even move. His eyeballs, fixated on the madman's every move, observed his surroundings. Jars of pickled lizards sat on a shelf. A heart of a tiger, with its veins still connected, pumped blood in and out in Blaine's imagination. A snake hanging on the ceiling stared at him with its beady eyes. Its jaws were open, and its fangs were there for anybody who wanted to see it.

The madman took a bowl and drew a knife-like object from behind him. *I am going to die*, thought Blaine. *I don't want to die at the hands of a killer. Will I be part of a historical site thousands of years later?* The madman took some herbs, seeds, and grated some—was that some snake scales?—and crushed them using the knife-like object in a bowl.

As the madman applied the substance to Blaine's wounds, Blaine looked up, anticipating the worst: death. The madman poked him in the back a few times again, and Blaine realised that he wasn't frozen anymore. He moved his fingers, and stretched, standing up. Was he supposed to thank him? Blaine looked at his hands. Instead of blood, he saw his hands healed perfectly. His wounds seemed to have disappeared into thin air. He wanted to question the wise man in the peculiar cavern *how* he worked his magic, but the wise man simply wrapped his hand around his fist and bowed to Blaine lightly. Blaine did the same.

The wise man seemed to know the mountain better than Blaine did. He walked with confidence, his robes sweeping behind him. Blaine struggled to keep up with his pace. A large weeping willow lined the bank of a river that ran across the clearing. On the bank, there was a small wooden port that jutted out, and beside it was a bamboo raft floating on the rushing water. A small breeze blew from the opposite side of which the water was going. The wise man gestured in the direction of the raft, as if to say, 'Go onto the raft. I will bring you to where you belong.' Blaine stepped tentatively onto the raft. The wise man followed, and stood in front of Blaine. Holding a wooden oar, he undid the knot that tied the raft to the port. At once, the wise man began to steer the boat in the direction of the wind which was getting stronger and stronger. White, foamy water thrashed around the raft.

A fog surrounded them as they went further upwards. Blaine thought he saw shadows in the misty air, but the wise man rowed too quickly for him to see the shapes of the shadows before they moved on. The wind roared in their ears, the water was nearly as deafening. Blaine thought he heard laughter in the mist, but he wasn't sure if it really was somebody laughing or if it was just the sound of water around them. In the distance, Blaine could make out a port with a man who looked like the wise man, but who looked a bit younger. The wise man stopped the raft at the port, and Blaine wrapped his fist with his palm, and bowed lightly to the wise man. The other man waved him off the raft and onto the ground. The fog cleared as quickly as it was formed. Blaine stepped onto solid ground, holding his knapsack with his sweaty fingers. Staring at the rows and rows of houses, he felt like he belonged among the laughter and the bustling village. Children were running around the streets, playing joyously. A piece of paper fell out of his pocket.

He unfolded the piece of paper.

Welcome home.

The King's Journey

St. Paul's Convent School, Chung, Chi Yuet Chianne – 13

A long time ago, in the Jian Guo period, there was a king. The King had done many good things for his state and he was loved. However, as time passed by, he was spoiled by his people, he forgot it was hard work that led to success, and so he grew selfish and oblivious to his responsibilities.

A few months later, the King was watching a dance performance when he stood up and declared that he was sick of it. The King had been pampered for almost three months. His lavish lifestyle was boring him. No one was invading his state, the soldiers were training well, the economy was going up, he had nothing to attend to.

So, he requested one of his men to post notices around the city, stating whoever could entertain the King would receive a prize — twenty gold pieces. Citizens desperately in need of money flocked to the King's residence. One after another, the King waved off villagers doing comical skits, self-proclaimed wizards and witches pulling off conjuring tricks and professional actors performing hair-raising renditions of traditional dramas.

At the end of the day, he was convinced that no one could provide him solace. He was viewing the final performances when an old man trudged in. The man's gaze coated over the King and his men. He was observing them with a pensive furrow over bushy black eyebrows that met in the middle. His spotted skin draped over his face like a curtain, he looked like he could barely stand up. His limbs were short and barely functioning. He was carrying a colossal backpack made of bamboo, along with a sling pouch which bore a cream coloured bottle. The visitor was wearing tattered clothes, a greenish-blue one piece with a navy-blue belt tied around the middle, constraining his stomach. He was hunched over from the weight of his rucksack.

There was an odd stalwart gleam in the man's eyes, contrasting to his attire. 'I am here to entertain you, my King,' he spoke. His voice was even and placid, unlike the men who usually spoke with admiration to the King. 'You could go on an adventure.' The King looked at him, curious. The man's brown orbs bore back into him. 'There's a mountain, Huang Shan. One of the tallest mountains in China. There's a rumour that there is a temple there, where the spirit of the Grandfather of the Sun visits from time to time, to offer a tablet of youth to the worshippers who provide offerings for him. If you agree, I could lead you and your men to the top of the mountain where he appears.' Now this was something that he hadn't experienced. In a heartbeat, he said yes.

And so the project commenced. The King refused to walk the gruelling roads of Huang Shan on his own, and asked for his men to arrange citizens to dig and pave a road which went up Huang Shan. Millions of citizens were involved. After a month, the road was built. The journey went on for days. One day, a messenger came, and handed a bamboo parchment to the King. His eyes scanned over the words. His state was being invaded by a neighbouring state! He fell into deep contemplation. His state needed him, but he was already halfway up the mountain! He clenched his teeth and mumbled, 'Tell my best men to deal with it.' 'But they have no experience leading a whole army! It has to be you!' The messenger pleaded. Deep inside, a part of the King that still held the tiniest bit of righteousness, agreed. But his ambition had taken over him, and he replied, 'It's my final decision.' He closed the window of his carriage, and the horses marched on.

After a week, the King finally arrived at the top of the mountain. White wisps of fog covered the ground, but tufts of lush grass peeked out from the mist. He spotted a blazing orb at the edge of the horizon. Nothing should be able to survive at such high grounds, but flowers and trees adorned the top of the mountain. Worms slithered in the grass, hares hunted for prey, birds chirped melodies in the trees. It was deathly cold everywhere else, but the frost didn't seem to reach Huang Shan. Through the fog, the King could see the caps of various mountains peeking through the thick fog. They looked pocket-sized when he looked at them from such height, topped with sheens of glass-like ice, like a frozen stone path.

The Old Man's shout broke the King's reverie. 'I've found the temple, your Majesty!' The King was rapturous. He had not met his goal yet, but he was so, so close. A temple that the King did not remember seeing loomed before him. The walls were a shade of white purer than snow, thousands of lanterns hung below sloping roofs which led to

meticulously carved statues of dragons. There were two identical watchtowers on the sides, arrayed with various engravings of ancient Chinese myths coloured with wonderful greens and blues and golds. On the roof of the temple, a statue of the sun sat, carved from gold and marble, its rays stretching out like waves.

The Old Man waddled in, and the King and his men followed suit. Soon, they arrived at a shrine. A statue of the Grandfather of the Sun sat in the middle of two gold pillars engraved with dragons and horses. The statue's face was grave and solemn. The Old Man bowed, a low one, and gestured the King to do so too. After they all bowed, the Old Man told the men to provide the offering. They start laying down the items they carried in giant rucksacks. When a meal that was fit to feed ten hungry men was laid across the floor, the King kneeled. The Old Man began to recite a prayer, and he followed. After thirty minutes, and the King was beginning to get tired, his mouth was going slack.

Just then, a light appeared before him. It was the Grandfather of the Sun. He had bronze, healthy skin and a muscular physique, almost like a statue. Blazing robes flowed with grace behind him, and his eyes were hardened and stern. He sat down, and began feasting, barely acknowledging anyone in the room. The King gaped at him in disbelief. He tried to speak up, but the Old Man held up a hand, warning him to wait for the god to speak first.

It was five hours before the Grandfather of the Sun spoke to the King. By this time, the King's legs were numb and he expected an explanation. 'Your state has been defeated, King.' He had been too wrapped up in this whole ordeal, and had forgotten about his state. 'Tell me, King, even if you did live forever, what will you do? You were unsatisfied before you went on this journey, and after you take the tablet, you are going to return to your castle, and it's going the same cycle, over and over again.' The god said nonchalantly, and it angered the King. 'You don't know anything about me! After I take it, I'll be —' He couldn't find the words. 'I'll be,' That was when he realised the god was correct. 'What I'm trying to say here, young man, is that life isn't worth a thing if it isn't so short. It's meant to be experienced, to be consumed, to be felt in a short period of time, to cram it with the most meaningful experiences you can get, to love, to laugh, to cry, to sing and to dance, and that's it. It ends, and as you lie on your deathbed — you'll be grateful for all those experiences you had. To be immortal, is not living.' The King couldn't bring his mouth to move. He had only realised now that he had abandoned his state for his own selfish desires. 'Tell you what, I'll turn back time, back to the day before you met my acquaintance here.' He gestures to the Old Man, and he transforms. Now, had flowing robes, longer hair, his back was no longer hunched, and he looked poised and confident. 'Now go, and be the great king you are meant to be.' With a poof, the Grandfather of the Sun and the Old Man disappear into thin air. The days begin turning, the sky alternates between night and day until it stops at a sunny afternoon. The King dashes out into the sunlight. As he sprints towards his horse to save his state, the temple dissipates and the mountain returns to what it's supposed to look like: dull, freezing and lifeless. But the landscape doesn't reflect the King's emotions at all; the mountain is glum, yet he is brimming with youth, ready to live and to die and to fight for his people and his state.

The Orphan's Key

St. Paul's Convent School, Kaur, Puneet – 14

I was out of breath. I decided to take a rest. Panting loudly with my hands on my knees, I looked back. He was catching up. I couldn't stop. Not yet. My thin cotton shirt was all wet, but I couldn't feel a drop of water on my head. I started running again, not minding the shirt sticking to my back, making me feel disgusting. After all, this was just a small matter compared to why I was running.

The Emperor made an announcement last Friday, about a competition. A competition that could change my life. He declared to the sea of people, "There shall be a track competition on one of our most magical places, the Yellow Mountain. The one to reach the summit first would be the most robust, fearless and wise man. He shall have the honour to join our military service and be awarded with the Pill of Immortality". It sounded like a pleasant offer, but was there really a pill to turn immortal in the 20th century? Regardless, I didn't participate to win the mystical pill.

Being an adopted 13-year old of a Chinese family is not gratifying. Even though my new 'parents' loved me with all their heart, I was often overlooked by the society, not only because I was once an unwanted child, but also because I was a girl. Girls were known to be weak, while boys were courageous. This century's old lie was engraved in the Hong Village, chanted as if it were a fact. I joined this competition to change people's backward mindset. And to bring honour to my 'family'. This competition would decide my fate.

I could see the uneven ground below me slowing down. I halted and leaned against a peculiarly-shaped rock. The hard material scratched my drenched back, but it was still relaxing. The other competitors were still catching up. Some were crawling, some were making allies and some were resting. I took this once in a lifetime opportunity to let my eyes roam around this supposedly other-worldly mountain. As high as I could see, the granite peaks reached to meet the white clouds shining because of the piercing July sun. Lush green plants which looked like pine trees trailed down the golden brown peaks. The astounding scenery enthralled me with its beauty.

Suddenly, I was involuntarily pushed out of my hypnotized mind— I couldn't feel the stony ground below my feet. My head was spinning as I saw the blazing sun, the wood-coloured peaks and...something bright again? I was falling. Oh no! My instinct made me scream but I couldn't as I could feel some air blocking my throat. Was I going to die? No! I tried to hang onto something but nothing came between my hands. Saying I was scared was an understatement. I tried to calm my panic-stricken state but I knew I was going to die. With that thought and one last look at the distance between me and the ground, I was pulled into a world of utter darkness.

"Who is she?" I heard a muffled voice ask. "I think she is a human," another voice answered. I jerked my eyes open as I felt cold liquid splashing onto my face. I gasped as I was face-to-face with a deer and moved backwards quickly. The deer was surprised also. I looked around expecting to see a human but all I saw were deer, deer and more deer. Where was I? I gasped again as I realized I was with the one and only herd of sika deer! "Why were you hanging on a tree? Are you a photographer? Because I have only seen photographers doing such a thing," the chocolate-coloured deer said. A deer! I gasped once again. "I do not think she is a human," the dark brown deer behind me spoke. I gasped one more time. "Definitely, humans speak a lot of languages but I do not think they speak this..." it hesitated and continued again, "gasping language". After a moment, all the deer started gasping.

I cleared my throat and tried my best to say, "I...I am a human," They almost immediately stopped gasping. "You...You can speak?" I asked, completely terrified by this whole situation. I heard a chorus of "yes". The same chocolate-coloured deer faced me and explained everything, "We saw you hanging on that tree", he pointed to a huge tree standing at the cliff of the peak we were standing on, before continuing, "and concluded that you were in trouble, as you weren't responding to us so we decided to save you. No need to say thank you", it said with a proud smile. "Thank you so much!" I replied, not listening to it. It responded with a slight nod while making eye contact.

After looking at my eyes, its face looked shocked. "Are you from a family of 'Han' Chinese?" Perplexed as to how it could know my original identity, I replied, "Yes". "You have the key!" I furrowed my eyebrows. A key? Is it referring to my necklace? My 'mother' had told me I was wearing this necklace when they adopted me, so I assumed it was given to me by my original parents and kept it around my neck as a symbol of their love. I showed the deer my necklace. After examining the necklace, it said, "Do you see my companions? We are a rescue team. We rescue anyone who is in trouble. But we couldn't save them.". "Them?" I asked. "Your parents. They were travellers. They

would have been the first people to reach the summit if they hadn't been...thrown off the cliff by their competitors, humans who wanted to reach the summit before your parents did," it explained. I was shocked to know the truth about my parents. All this time, I had thought I was an unwanted child. "But before, they rescued me from the hunters." It shivered from the sorrowful memory. "They told me their daughter, you, were special, you had brown eyes with a sparkle of blue dots, they made me able to recognize you, and that they would give the key they freed me with, to you, the most precious person in the world. They believed you would be the key. The key to save everyone." I couldn't see clearly as tears clouded my vision. I didn't know my parents were...heroes. They...believed in me. I tried to reply, but all I could say was "Wow". "Is there anything I can do for you?" the deer asked me genuinely.

I was quiet for a few moments, trying to digest everything the deer had spilled onto me. If my parents had faith that I was the key to saving everyone, I would. Smiling, feeling a wave of excitement within me, I told the deer everything about the competition and the reason behind why I had joined it. "I would love to help you, and besides, there aren't any rules for this competition. Are you ready?"

Not long after I was flying like dandelions scattered by wind. The breeze swept through my hair, making me shiver more because of the fluttering sensation in my stomach. "How is the weather up there?" Choco asked, laughing. I had named him Choco— that deer's skin constantly reminded me of chocolate. "Amazing!" I shouted.

"We are here!" I made it! Snow—white clouds surrounded me, blocking my vision of the time when I was at the bottom. Facing Choco, I said, "Thank you!" It grunted in response and said, "Every cloud has a silver lining." Sometimes, achieving your goals may be hindered by people around you, but the important thing is, you should believe in yourself. In the process, you may start falling, but being around people who make you feel self—assured, you start to fly, higher than ever. A grin gradually appeared on my sweaty face.

The Yellow Mountain truly is a magical place.

Forgotten

St. Paul's Convent School, Lee, Chloe – 14

Why is Huangshan so captivating? When you gaze at the endless wall of rocks, what do you think of? How time, no matter how fluid, solidifies and merges the modern age with Ancient China? How the soil you tread on has once been an inspiration for Chinese poets? How the fragrant air makes you understand the praises Li Bai once wrote for this mountain? For me, it's the overnight K46 rushing beneath a canopy of stars through the city of Fuzhou.

With Hong Kong miles behind me and a blanket wrapped around my drowsy self, the train sails onto the bridge, drifts over the rail, glides on air, soars out of the tunnel and reveals the chartreuse plains of the land of dragons. The most thrilling ride in China indeed! Screams explode as carriages tumble into another black shroud. My window shatters to the rattle of metal wind chimes, and like Icarus, I plummet out of the twisted cage.

At the end of the portal lies pain as I hit the ground, but also a mesmerising scene. The Greeting—Guest Pine bows, its arm, jade and emerald outstretched and pointing to the heavens. I stagger towards the light and see a sage standing amidst its roots. With a bearded face and knobbly hands stroking the thinning hair, he directs his radiant smile towards the rising sun, as if challenging the stars to shine brighter. “Ah!” he cries. “The sparrows told me you would arrive.” He turns around and his silver grey robe twirls in the wind. “Come, I know the perfect place to have lunch.” If nature predicted my arrival, then let this be my fate.

Huangshan's mountainous landscape is harder to climb than I thought. Its sides are jagged and the sparse trees cover its barren body in patches like rags. All around us were mountains, mountains and mountains, their gorges dipping far below the fog and their proud crests braving the elements. I imagine that the gods pulled up piles of mud, draped them in random mismatching cloaks and set them on the far prettier stairway to their holy empire, to let them gaze on humans trudging on hills and plateaus. Suddenly I hear a whisper in my ear: “Oh child, that's not for you.” The sage leads me, and I follow. Panting like a dog I finally reach the top of the peak and remind myself that I must exercise more in the future.

“Let me introduce myself” he announces to ease the growing tension. “I'm Yiwang, a poet-in-training. I come to these mountains to seek inspiration. Why are you here?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I fell through a portal?” I answer meekly.

He tilts his head. “A portal? It must be the work of the gods. They have given me inspiration!” His eyes glimmer as he proclaims “Thanks be to Huangdi! My work will soar beyond excellency!” I do not understand his ecstasy, but am glad to be the source of it.

We pass the Lotus Peak, climb up the Hundred Ladders, stroll by the Haixin Pavillion, and arrive at Bu Xian Qiao, the famous fairy bridge. Stationed in a crevice, its immense height adds to the feeling of flight. Between cloud and sky we lay out fruit, rice and leeks, and sup until noon. The sun beams at us mortal fairies, warming our cheeks as we chat and eat. “Where are you from, my friend?”

“The South, sir.” I reply.

He clutches his peach and bursts into peals of laughter, the sweet juices running down his fingers as he chuckles, his black irises disappearing behind the slits of his heavy eyelids. “The South! There's no need to be humble; you fell out from the sky.” Smirking, he glances up at the fog and stops guffawing. “We should get going. We have to arrive at the camp before sunset.”

We continue trekking along the summits for 6 hours, Yiwang belting a merry tune or two to hasten our pace. His booming voice echoing in the heights, intense and passionate, round and round. “Chant the female part!” I, with my coarse howling, belt out his song. He doesn't seem to mind my cawing though. I wish my music teachers were also like him.

Slowly the sun leaves us to our own company as we arrive at our destination under Flying Over Rock. “Bai Jiu is a treasure in my village. Only the best is reserved for guests.” He uncaps a wide jar shaped like a Greek aryballos flask, and pours out the transparent liquid. “I figure that we would wine and dine as I tell you more about a poet's life,” he says mid sip.

“You must have heard of Li Bai and Du Fu. They write such amazing poems about nature. See, I aspire to be famous like Li Bai, and I know that anyone can achieve their goals as long as they have the right beginning. I have tried hard to wake up my talents inside. I sojourned to rural villages, stopped by every city, and wandered around the

countryside, in the hope that I would be stimulated to write something that would be marvelled at for ages to come. I constantly dream that after I die, scholars would pick up my work and be proud that they hold the original manuscript, like a precious piece of art. But nothing seems to motivate my pen to spill a single word. Nothing flows out like the Eastern wind. Nothing seems to sound right.” I nod in understanding, having gone through the pains of writing an English poem myself. I asked Wendi, the patron god of poets for help so my writing could be realistic, enthralling and memorable. And you came!” He takes another swig of the liquor, furrows his brow and stares into the distance. “My name is of bad fortune, it sounds like the word ‘forgotten’. I don’t want to be buried in an unmarked grave. I want my story to be told, my legacy to be my sensational poems. But first I must write one.” He empties his cup, stands up and hands me a writing brush. “You bring me promise, potential seen in none other. Quick, write before the candle runs out!” I swallow the savoury wine and grin at my partner.

What would otherwise be a boring night with Netflix becomes a flurry of ideas, imagination, images translated through ink. We delve into the depths of heart and mind, summoning every ounce of energy, channelling excellency into each stroke, infusing every page with power and pride, pouring out a masterpiece while gulping down spirits. We compose drunkenly, but passionately.

By sunrise, we unroll the scroll which Yiwang deems “Perfect!” The rays of the rising sun shines on the crests of Huangshan. “Look! Huangdi has shone his light on me! I see a glorious future, people lining up for commissions, waiting as I unlock the mysteries of Huangshan.” I laugh hesitantly, knowing that I have done nothing to change his fate.

All of a sudden, flames engulf the pinnacles of the dragon and the sky swallows Yiwang in the middle of his speech. “Wait! Our composition isn’t finished yet...” I shake my head helplessly. What can I do? I am no longer a welcome guest of this century. The clouds, like a pair of claws lift me from the ground. “Don’t! I have so much more to write!” The heavens transported me here, and now they will return me to my city. They harden against my pleas and place me back in 2021. I reappear in Kong Kong, with its cars honking and dogs barking, as if my expedition to Anhui never happened.

While Li Bai and Du Fu went on to be acclaimed as the greatest poets of their time, I never heard of Yiwang ever again. It was as if Huangdi removed him from history, because he cheated on Calliope with a friend from another country. Or did he wake from his drunken dream, leaving his scroll in the labyrinth of time, ultimately fulfilling the prophecy of his name?

Our cups raised to the mighty Huangshan,
Flora and fauna crown my friend divine.
I care not when she would depart,
Creations with the muses will always shine.

Huangshan gave Yiwang the spark for his flame and took everything else away from him. Likewise, the misty mountains embraced me in their magic, but blurred my mourning eyes from the mystical scenes.

The Stranger Says Hi

St. Paul's Convent School, Lui, Zoe – 14

I'm constantly moving, but I'm always here.

For some of me, I've been here all my life. The beautiful Huangshan Mountain is all I know. For some of me, this is only part of a longer journey. Where the journey is to though, I only have a vague idea.

Sometimes, I stare down in an almighty, omniscient manner. I see everything from here. Time, while it is a significant matter to most who tread into the mountains, means almost nothing to me. I have seen famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. I have seen other poets, perhaps not as famous, throughout the centuries, and I will continue to do so as time passes (though an intriguing boy taught me that this wouldn't necessarily be true).

Sometimes, I fancy myself as the sea. People do call me a sea, after all. I am told that the sea can have many colours. I have never seen the turquoise waters of a bay, or ferocious waves crashing down into the inky depths. The sea is poetic, I am told, and so am I.

I am the 'Sea of Clouds'.

Or that's what they call me, anyway.

*A young man is he, young as one could've been
Armed with first honours
With a heart full with glee
"Provide the poor with manors!
Bygone the ill men's drees!
Away with rich scammers
And scandalous decrees!"*

Huangshan is known for its strange-looking pines, hot springs, mystical clouds and stunning peaks. We are called the *Sijue*, the Four Extremes. Sometimes we hope that it means extremely beautiful. It may sound vain, after all, we are marvels of the mountains, we are striking, otherworldly. But sometimes we ask ourselves, is this how we are defined?

*Here comes Covid-19,
Quick, angry and keen.
Oh no his plans! His future! His job!
And his poor girlfriend Eugene!
"Away with earthly matters, my dear boy,
Come be zen like me!
Be enlightened! Inspired! And don't die!
Come to Huangshan with me!"*

*He came, he ran, he got lost,
And got tossed
Somewhere into the mysterious massive ancient towering multi-coloured mountainously-rocky Huangshan.*

The boy is lost. I can see him with knees pulled to his chest from the sky. "Blasted old man," he mutters. "Why am I here? Stupid long beard!" Long beard? I think of one of Li Bai's famous lines: My white hair is three thousand feet long, but my misery exceeds it by far. A poor scholar told me about it. He wanted to be greater than Li Bai. I wonder if he succeeded.

Perhaps Li Bai himself brought the boy here. Maybe he came back briefly when the realms of Heaven and Hell and the realm of the living were open in Yulan Festival. I try to tell the boy that he is next to Pine. Which means he's about to fall off the cliff, when he murmurs:

*To chop, or not to chop, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler for nematodes to chew
The gnarled exotic branches of Huangshan's pride,
Or to marvel nature's brilliance, clear sky against loden leaves,
To chop? To admire?
And by that ax to say we decide all,
Pine furniture, or pine feed for bugs,
Which is better? 'Tis the perseverance,
That sets the pine on cliffs
To eat? To admire!*

Granted, I only ever hear Chinese poets lamenting about wine (Li Bai's favourite, as I recall), or describing wars (Du Fu was born in the right time), but never Shakespeare parodies about chopping trees. Pine looked rather relieved that it wasn't going to be sold as a cupboard in IKEA, though bringing up pine nematodes is a terrible idea. Doesn't he know that it's a great threat to Pine?

"How do you stay up like this?" The boy asks Pine. "How can anything grow on rocks?"

Pine replies:

"I'm just a pine tree, boy. I grow, I survive."

A nearby squirrel adds:

"Now why don't you switch off your camera flash, it's disturbing."

*"In hot springs you will find
(Aside that one should never wear jeans in springs)
Why beauty's essence
Cannot be captured
By pixels, by ink,
But by a genuine link,
Of nature's appreciation, by mankind's admiration."*

*But he sees this:
ALL HAIL SPRING THE CASH COW!
Dewdrops on leaves, twinkle, shimmer,
Mist in the mountains, wavers, drifts,
As gold under fingertips, from hotels you bring
Laughs, chuckles, whistles, sings,
Oh cash cow of Huangshan! How you are revered!
How you are worshipped!
By mankind's admiration of the gold you bring!*

He stands on one of Huangshan's peaks. Spring is still fuming from the insult. Despite everything, Peak still gives him a stunning view. And I think, perhaps rather arrogantly, that he must be admiring how the huge boulders rise dramatically from the ground. Clouds encase them, like thick candy floss. The mist casts a thin veil over the striking rocks. His mouth drops open, his eyes shine brightly, and he finally says: "This is nothing like the Seven Star Crag!"

Ah, he isn't so ignorant after all.

He sighs. "You are such a beautiful cash cow." He even looks sad.

I take it back. I wish someone would just tell him that we have thirteen species under state protection, and a cloud leopard (one of those species) should eat him up for seeing us as a gold mine instead of appreciating nature's gift to mankind.

How can he judge, when he hasn't even explored all our imposing peaks, or our graceful waterfalls? When he would never reach the significance of the countless poets and artists who lived here, or the importance of us in Chinese art and literature?

"You have no sense of aesthetics," I say.

He looks up calmly. "Do you want me to like it here?"

"You must love the pandemic," he adds, "There're almost no tourists."

I am the Sea of Clouds. I am an endless ocean. I have no beginning, no end, no face, but he must know that I'm confused.

"Ah, I forgot, you've got your heads in the clouds," he smirks. "Literally," he says to Peak.

"You are breathtaking, only because you're... massive. Even the rich and powerful would feel small, standing here. You are the universe, and I am just a spot. You make us feel small. Is this why you're mysterious? Because we can't look beyond? Because you obscure our sight?"

"It must be," he says to himself. "Most people don't look at things twice when the path is clear."

"So they like us, BECAUSE WE *BLIND* THEM?" I roar. The sky darkens and splits like a desert after drought.

He glares at me. It looks rather comical, like an ant angry at humans for being too large.

*You think you're so great
Cuz clouds can talk
And your vast botanology.
The Shanshui is nice
The poems all praise
And Avatar has blue aliens*

*Ancient pine trees
Mean nothing to me
'Cept they grow on cliffs
Does it matter to you?
Does it make you jolly
If we'd bow and wow and scream?
Everyone roots in soil
But your roots are in rock
And that's what's so amazin'
End of the day
You're just survivin'
They don't care if you're rottin'
They don't care if bugs a-chewin'
They're here cuz
Pine's a special tinkerthingy*

*Green in the mountains
Makes Peak less plain
What do people need for rock
'Cept for Shanshui?
People look at you
Cuz Pine grows sideways
Green looks better
Than plain old granite*

*I see your birds, I see your bugs
Bustling Thronging Buzzing Twittering
Those Living stuff, Feeling stuff
I see the litter, I see the cigs
Stinking Reeking Spoiling Rotting
I see
The green dots that dot your daunting rocks
Your flora, fauna, flourishing
We don't
Care whatsoever
But they
Were here forever
But they are what makes you true
Our cigs can burn you down
Our visitors wear you down
Dead things are only pretty
If we give you meaning
But your habitants love you through and through
So love them better
Your permanent residents
Before we make you go*

*Dead things are only pretty
If we give you meaning
But your habitants love you through and through*

“When I think of Huangshan, I see mountains with no people and clear waterfalls. It looks heavenly, somewhere we can't reach. Now we can see you, hear you, feel you. We even have cable cars where we can wow at you for an hour then go back to hot spring hotels for a nice bath.”

“We don't like you as much when our presence is so clear, but don't worry, your reputation from all those poems and paintings will keep you popular for a while if nothing drastic happens. But your natural inhabitants will love you forever. We may not.”

He walks away. He looks satisfied with his lecture. As a response, I rain on the plants.

*I went to Huangshan
The view's an electric shock
Pretty clouds can talk.*

Affection Is without Rival

St. Paul's Convent School, Pang, Hin Yue Hillary – 13

When I was young, my grandmother used to be my personal storyteller and she told me all that she had witnessed and heard. There was a tale from China's magical mountains that she told me in her low, husky tone, and I still remember that tale word by word even today.

About 4500 years ago, there was a mountain that stood tall and proud in the southern part of China. Cottages dotted around the foot of the mountain, and villagers living in the cottages led simple yet harmonious lives. However, none of them had ever climbed up the mountain before, not to mention reaching the top and perhaps enjoying the picturesque sunset – the bloody red sun making its way down to the horizon, while the clouds shone pale pink, blending in with the blue skies. They were all scaredy-cats, and they did not even bother to try climbing the mountain as it was so tall that it reached the sky! Due to the mountain's monstrous height, it was named 'Sky Mountain'. Therefore, the villagers considered climbing the mountain dangerous, and that reaching the top an impossible task for centuries, until a mute mistress named Hwang Yin, who lived in one of the obscured cottages, gave birth to a baby boy named Hwang Shen. When Shen was only two years old, he ran around the village as fast as lightning; and at the age of three, he was able to pick up two huge buckets of water and balance one on his head and walk all the way from the well miles away back to the village without taking a rest. It was almost impossible for a middle-aged man to do so during that time, and no one knew why three-year-old Shen was able to do so. Therefore, everyone in the village considered Shen a miracle child.

Shen grew up surrounded by the praises of the villagers, and indeed, he was growing stronger and stronger as days passed. He turned out to be a very cheerful gentleman, and he himself believed that he was indeed someone born differently. On a usual morning, twelve-year-old Shen woke his mother up from her sweet dreams by screaming in her ears. Hwang Yin woke up, annoyed, although her son had always been delightful, she had never seen Shen that excited before! She knew something fishy was going on. Shen looked at Yin with glimmering eyes, and instantly blurted out, "I have decided to climb Sky Mountain and go up to the top! Tomorrow!"

Yin was instantly snapped out from her daydream, and in horror, she held her son's shoulder and shook him furiously, and her terrified face showed: 'No! No, don't you dare! You will die!' Although she knew that her son was so strong that he could lift and carry an entire cottage on his back—and that Shen was unexpectedly athletic and had extremely nimble limbs, she knew once Shen fell off the tall mountain while climbing it, there was no way he was going to survive the fall no matter how gifted Shen was. Seeing that his mother's face had turned as white as a paper, Shen let out a chuckle and looked into his mother's teary eyes which were full of fright, and in a whisper, he said, "I can do this. I have the strength and potential to do so. I know that I am gifted enough to climb this mountain." The mute mother's face softened and she let out an airy sigh, for she knew that once her son had made up his mind, there was no turning back.

The next day, Shen carried a sack with some slices of soggy wheat bread and some water. With the villagers' and Yin's company, they approached the rocky wall of Sky Mountain, which signaled the departure of Shen. Yin gave her son a bone-breaking hug as tears rolled down her cheeks and she bid Shen goodbye with her airy sobs. Although Yin was worried to death, she believed her son had the potential to climb to the top of the mountain.

Shen gave his mother a slight smile and with one easy leap, he grabbed hold of the rocky walls and started climbing up the mountain. As time passed, Shen was gradually out of sight. Everyone in the village just wished that Shen could pay full attention while climbing Sky Mountain and make it back to the village alive.

Shen was definitely gifted in strength and he didn't get a bit tired all the way while climbing up the mountain. He only slowed down to grab a few bites and with his athletic body, he was able to make it safely to the top of the mountain in two days! Only with a few cuts and bruises, Shen stood at the top of the mountain with his head held high. The first man to conquer Sky Mountain! As Shen was admiring the breath-taking scenery of the endless turquoise sea stretching out far, far away, a goddess suddenly appeared in front of him.

The goddess was pale blue and was wearing a turquoise dress, and the goddess was shimmering in pale blue light. Shen was quite taken aback by the appearance of the goddess, after blinking twice, he cautiously questioned, "You are...?"

"I am the goddess of Sky Mountain. Congratulations on making to the top of Sky Mountain. I have waited so long." The Sky Mountain said.

"What do you mean you have waited so long?" Shen asked in a whisper.

"Little did you know, you are made to meet me on this magically tall mountain. I am here to tell the truth." The goddess said.

"The truth?" Shen asked.

"Your mother is mute because this mountain took away her voice in exchange for your gifted strength and athletic body. Before you were born, your mother actually gave birth to your elder brother, but he was so weak that he died hours after he was born. It was no doubt extremely sad and painful for your mother. Your mother then was later pregnant with you, she immediately came to the foot of Sky Mountain. Believing that this tall mountain stands in the form of a supreme king, she prayed, hoping to give birth to a strong child, so that the child can have a long healthy life. This magical mountain heard her wish, and that night in her dream, the mountain told her that you would be granted with unbelievable strength only if she would sacrifice her voice. Your mother promised this magical mountain without hesitation. The next morning, Yin woke up mute. As the goddess of Sky Mountain, I witnessed all this with my own eyes." the goddess said.

Shen was speechless. His mother gave up her own voice for him.

"This is the great love of your mother for you. Now that you are the first person to conquer this magical Sky Mountain and is superior, are you satisfied?"

Shen nodded his head in anticipation.

"And now are you willing to give up your strength and athletic body in order to allow your mother to gain her voice back?" The Goddess took a deep breath and asked.

This idea struck Shen like lightning. Giving up his strength and athletic body, which was his first priority and the thing that he valued the most throughout the twelve years of his life? This prized possession of his was what made him so confident and cheerful during these twelve years. This was simply too absurd for him.

"You made a great achievement – conquering Sky Mountain, thanks to your mother. Now that you have completed the goal of your life, shouldn't you give something back to your mother who helped you greatly? Do you love your mother?" the goddess questioned.

Shen nodded absent-mindedly.

"Then you should give it up for your mother. She had certainly done a great thing for you, in order to let you be strong and stay healthy, and even to become the superior child that conquered Sky mountain at the age of twelve." The goddess softly spoke. "I swear to keep you healthy and long-lived. You will only lose your valuable strength and athletic body."

Shen nodded slowly while tears welled up in his eyes. "I am willing to give up my strength and body for my mother, I may not be praised that much anymore, but for my mother, I am willing to do anything. This is my great love for my mother." He said. Shen believed that for his mother, he was willing to let go.

The goddess nodded and with a snap of her fingers, Shen disappeared and reappeared at the foot of the mountain. Shen heaved a sigh and looked up to the mountain, and he was sure that he saw Sky Mountain magically shimmering.

After that day, Shen was not that miracle child who had unbelievable strength and strong limbs anymore, while his mother was not the mute, miserable mistress. Hwang Yin had become a lot more cheerful and always flashed radiant smiles, grateful to have her voice back. Shen was not that much often praised anymore, but certainly no one forgot his superior act of conquering Sky Mountain, and also the great love Hwang Yin and Hwang Shen shared.

Tales of Huangshan

St. Paul's Convent School, Seng, Si Laam Audrey – 13

The Yellow Mountains is located in Eastern China, and is commonly known as Huangshan. For generations, legends of these mountains are passed down; silent whispers in the house, elders telling stories to children. Though some do wonder: what if there is more to it than mere legends?

That is NOT the question in Ashley's mind as she gazes up at the looming mountains, a hand raised to block the harsh morning sun, clouds and fogs swirling around the mountain's top. With a sigh, she first takes out her video recorder and sets up her equipment. If not for her viewers' request, she wouldn't even be interested in climbing this mountain! Coming all the way to China from Hong Kong is quite annoying for her, and she has to waste money too! Alas, Ashley still wants more subscribers for her channel. She then smoothens her hair one last time and checks her appearance in a small mirror. She presses the start button and puts on an over-enthusiastic smile.

"Hello! Welcome again to my channel, and today I will be scaling... the famous Huangshan of Eastern China, per most people's wishes!" Ashley moves her recorder slightly to a higher angle as it takes in the mountain. She starts to walk and continues to introduce the mountain. Instead of taking the main path to reach the top, she turns and walks towards a more secluded path, knowing that her viewers would love to watch her challenge.

During her climb, Ashley continues to film her surroundings, the silence and tranquility of the mountain around her, only occasionally broken by cries of wild animals. At first, she is indifferent to the view, but slowly, she starts to become mesmerised by the quiet nature of Huangshan as well. 'I understand why my viewers will request this now...' she muses to herself, 'And of course, there are the legends too...' Ashley thinks as she remembers memories of her childhood, listening to her grandparents' tales.

Suddenly, Ashley notices a path snaking through the trees, barely noticeable that she has to squint to make out the way. 'Huh...? i don't remember seeing this path when I studied the map before...?' She pushes some plants out of the way to see the path ending at the entrance of a cave, and lights seem to flash from within rhythmically. Despite her mind telling her that it is dangerous, her curiosity won. Raising her camera, she turns and makes her way to the cave.

Inside the cave, everything is dark except for the occasional bright glow of mysterious crystals embedded on the wall. 'This must be the lights she saw outside,' Ashley thinks. She can feel her gradually ascend, and she turns on her phone to check the time. To her surprise, her phone is not working, and she starts to panic as all her electronic devices seem to stop responding as well. However, her terror doesn't last long as she sees light at the edge. Ashley immediately rushes towards the apparent exit, wanting to escape as soon as possible.

All of a sudden, a beastly roar seems to echoes through the cave, so strong that Ashley needs to take a few steps to keep her footing. Fear courses through her at the unknown monster. Even so, she knows she will be completely trapped in the cave and with no choice, she exits the cave.

The bright sunlight blinds Ashley, and she blinks a few times to adapt to the light again. However, what she sees make her questions her own sanity. Somehow she has managed to make it to the top of Huangshan, a clear sky above her as she rises above the clouds and fogs, but what makes her question herself is the fact that there are currently several dragons flying around, their scales glittering in the sunlight. She admires in silent wonder as the dragons dance in the air, weaving around each other. It isn't long until one of the dragons notices Ashley and lets out a roar. In her panic, she barely acknowledges that this is the sound she heard in the cave.

However, what happens next is foggy, as if something is messing with Ashley's memory. She briefly remembers one of the dragons descending from the sky, letting out a growl while looking at her, its eyes seem to bore into her very own soul. Then she remembers climbing onto its back as it takes her into the sky, the feeling of rushing the air with her hair whipping around her. There is a sudden descend, and the last thing she notes before blacking out is that she is back at the starting point of her hike...

Ashley wakes up in a hospital next, monitor and machines beeping around her. Doctors and nurses soon rush into the room, quickly running medical checks on her. “A hiker found you on the route fainted,” they tell her, “You were brought to the hospital and set to receive treatments immediately, but the strange thing is there is nothing wrong with you...” Ashley merely nods, disoriented. ‘Then is what she saw only. Fever dream? It felt so real...’ It isn’t until she collects her own belongings that she sees it: a bright scale that glitters even in the white and blank light of the hospital...

“... so she kept it and treasures her adventure in her heart, forever.” A young boy stares up at his grandmother with wide eyes, intrigued by the legends of Huangshan. ‘How do you know for sure these tales are real though?’ He asks with his eyes twinkling. Her grandmother looks at him for a moment, contemplating her answer, then replies with a smile. “Who knows, maybe I have seen the dragons myself!” The boy sucks in a breath and gasps dramatically. “No way!” His grandmother laughs heartily as she messes up the boy’s hair, resulting in an indignant squeak.

Inside a shelf, an old video recorder sits in a back corner, a peculiar scale hidden behind it. And thus, the legends of Huangshan continue to be passed down...

Dark Secrets

St. Paul's Convent School, Tong, Charlotte – 14

The mountains were wreathed in mist and clouds. People said it made the mountains seem more magical, but are the mists actually hiding some dark secrets beneath?

Rosalind took out her precious camera, capturing scene after scene of the heart-stopping view before her. When she was small, her grandpa taught her photography skills such that she could capture precious moments of her life. Huangshan was definitely a place worth remembering. It was a heavenly place in this mortal world. Putting her camera away, Rosalind continued her long journey up the mountains, squeezing her way through the narrow roads and staircases, until she finally reached the famous “yi xian tian” of Huangshan.

Light seeped through the gap, painting the dull grey of the mountains into a buttery gold. And standing on the exit of the “yi xian tian” was... a girl? Rosalind's mouth hang open in dismay. The girl, seeing Rosalind stare at her, signalled her with a whisper, “*Come.*”

Enthralled, Rosalind started walking towards the girl, curiosity taking the best of her. Yet, when she neared the entrance, the girl smiled impishly and ran away, leaving Rosalind alone, trying desperately to catch her. Running breathlessly towards the exit, Rosalind tripped, and entered a world of darkness.

“Now, why did you have to complicate the whole problem, Sorbus? I told you this is serious matter.” A voice said.

“Why didn't you bring her here in the way we told you to? Now look what you've done!” Another voice agreed.

“Oh come on! I just wanted to see her face when she ran through the gateway while chasing me! It's so fun seeing mortal's face when they find themselves suddenly in a new era.” Sorbus replied, her voice tinged with childishness. “Besides, it's not like she will die from just a little trip.”

A sigh. “Sorbus, I thought we'd discussed when you can have fun and when you should be serious, hadn't we? What if the trip was lethal? What if – Rosalind, you're awake!” The speaker exclaimed.

Rosalind looked around in confusion. Where was she? She took a glance at the people standing beside her, and was utterly shocked. The famous, and supposed-to-be-dead poet Li Bai, was standing next to her with two other teenagers, and the also supposed-to-be-dead poet Du Fu.

“Rosalind. Nice to meet you.” Li Bai greeted.

“Why are you alive?” Rosalind responded, terrified. *Am I dead? Am I seeing ghosts?* She wondered.

“No, you are very much alive, and so am I.” Li Bai said, and Rosalind realized she had spoken her thoughts out.

“Now that you are awake, I'm sure you must wonder why you are suddenly here. Allow me to tell you the story as we enjoy some Huangshan Maofeng.”

“I lived here, in Huangshan during the 8th Century. I'm sure you know that. And I'm also sure you know people said I died because I was drunk. What a joke. Instead, I *nearly* died in a terrible war, between us poets and government officials. The government official who was the emperor's favourite back then hated me as he overheard the emperor admiring my works, thinking of giving me a position that is higher than his. He ordered people to create a poem in my name, shading the emperor, provoking the emperor, ordering to kill me. Du Fu and some of my

supporters formed an army in attempt to beat them and regain my name, but we lost. The emperor ordered people to make up some story faking my death and hid the whole history of the war. They thought they had killed me, but they did not. One of the Eight Immortals pitied me and saved me, Du Fu, and the others, and built us this village in Huangshan to protect us from enemies. Time is frozen on the day of the war. We go through the same loop every day -- waking up, training, preparing ourselves for the war, and in the afternoon, the Emperor's Army invade us, kill us, we fall into darkness, and when we wake up, we're all fine again. It's just the same loop.

No matter how we train, we could never defeat the enemies. So we're hoping you might help us defeat them, to put evils back where they belong. Hell."

"Wait what? Why me? I know nothing about fighting." Rosalind protested.

"It has to be you. The Eight Immortals revealed to us if anyone had high chance of beating them, it would be you."

"Now, do come on. You got to start training. We have 2 hours until the war begins." Du Fu cut in.

The time has come. After two hours of training, Rosalind felt fueled up. Especially after seeing others training with such enthusiasm and passion, Rosalind trained even harder, determined not to let them down. And now the time has come.

They were standing in front of Huangshan, wielding weapons, eyes staring ferociously ahead. Rosalind could feel her heart thumping, not because of fear, she realized in a jolt, but because of the adrenaline from the incoming war.

The mountains were quiet, the chilling calmness before a battle. After a while, Rosalind finally saw something coming. It looked somewhat like a sandstorm, but no, they were thousands, millions of men on galloping horses. The galloping sound of the horse hooves drew nearer, the "clip clop clip clop" matching the rhythm of Rosalind's own beating heart.

Li Bai patted her on the back. "Remember, this is your chance to change history. Oh, and one thing I forgot to tell you, since you're not like us, who are stuck in this time loop, you'll really die if you get killed later on. Don't worry," Li Bai added, seeing Rosalind's face turn pale white. "you'll be amazing, won't you? Oh, also note you might see someone you love very dearly later on in the battle. But it's just an illusion. Ignore it and continue your fighting. If you don't, you'll get hypnotised and eventually killed. Keep this in mind: the only thing that matters in a battle, is the final winner. "

As if planned, the enemy started their fight once Li Bai stopped speaking. Quickly tying her hair back in a ponytail, Rosalind began to fight.

She was a hurricane. Her blade was a merciless blur of silver, killing everyone in her way until she reached --

"Grandpa?" Rosalind whispered, dropping her weapon. Indeed, the face in front of her looked exactly like her long lost grandpa's face.

"Rosalind! Dear Rosalind, please let me go. You can bring peace to this land, by simply turning around, and letting me put this rope right here." The man said gently, though his eyes were merciless. He smirked in victory seeing Rosalind follow his orders. It was just a simple illusion, transforming himself into her beloved grandpa, and that was all it took to beat this girl Li Bai took to be his saviour. However strong she might be, he knew all too well about the common weakness of mortals. They are too cowardly to kill people dear to them.

The man pushed Rosalind violently to the ground. Putting his blade dangerously near her throat, he declared in a sing-song voice, “Put down your weapons! Or your little saviour dies~”

No! Rosalind screamed silently in her mind, seeing Li Bai and the others abandon their weapons to save her. But she could do nothing. Although she had broken out of her trance by the time the man pushed her to the ground, she was still unable to control her body the way she wanted. Oh, how useless she felt right now, seeing that man order his troops to kill Sorbus, Billis, Du Fu, and finally Li Bai right in front of her. They had looked up to her as their saviour, and she had got them killed. Even if she knew they would probably wake up all healthy again the next day due to the time loop, Rosalind still felt torn inside, knowing she failed them.

“Oh, Rosalind. All of your friends sacrificed themselves for you! How touching.” Wiping his eyes sarcastically, he continued, “And you failed them because of not having the courage to kill your grandpa, to feel your his life seep away in your hands. You are so weak, when it comes to the topic of loved ones. As much as I pity you, there must only be one winner of this war. And that is, me.” The man stuck his blade into Rosalind’s heart and drew it out in a swift. Rosalind crumpled onto the Earth, her blood slowly staining the trees near her.

Every spring in the years later, the trees that were stained by Rosalind’s blood bloomed with bright red flowers known as the Huangshan Azalea, their presence a silent reminder of the dark, twisted history and the wronged poets who live in the village hidden behind the mists, on the peaks of Huangshan.

The Voyages of the Amber Hero

St. Paul's Convent School, Wong, Fook Yiu Tillie – 13

A towering mountain surrounded by mist and mystery resided in eastern China. No one knew what secrets it held, their only knowledge being the name they gave it, Huangshan, The Mountains of The Yellow Emperor, and a village that was way above the heights, where only the worthy could visit.

Adventurers who sought to reach the peak of Huangshan returned empty-handed, battered, and bruised, each coming back with different stories of how they have rejected entry. Only one part of the tale always stayed the same, a booming voice that shouted, "We are the four evils." And disaster would take over.

A young girl, however, unknown to everyone, achieved this astounding feat and returned, not uttering a word. She was Xingyun, a name that destined her to reach the stars and clouds.

Decades ago, a passed down nursery rhyme called out to her, a small, catchy tune sung carelessly hiding a prophecy.

"The stars and clouds share the same sky,
For they climbed beyond the mountains high,
Yellow trails she would go up and down,
And so humble, not a sound!"

The song wrapped around Xingyun, a kind and gentle sound whispered, "Come to The Mountains of The Yellow Emperor..."

With that, young Xingyun wrapped her belongings with a piece of cloth and slung it over her shoulder. One more look at her empty home (She was an orphan), one more sigh and she set off on the journey of her life.

At the foot of the mountain, a stork flew above Xingyun's head and stopped in front of her on the yellow stairs.

"Halt! I am Ground Raiser, an adept of Huangshan. Do you see the amber path before you?"

Xingyun fretted. Was this a riddle? What was she supposed to say? She couldn't be defeated even before she reached the summit!

"Yes, I do." Xingyun chose to answer truthfully, "There's a road that stretches into the horizon."

"I see. You may pass." Ground Raiser stepped aside

Xingyun breathed out a sigh of relief and began her hike into the misty mountain.

The surrounding slopes, cliffs, caves were adorned with pine trees, topped with white, fluffy snow that increased as she ascended to the slope. The amber path seemed to dimly radiate a warm glow that embraced Xingyun, making her feel safe despite no one was alongside protecting her. The wind felt different as if someone was blowing down instead of it coming from natural clouds. Birds chirped, lizards scurried, frogs croaked, complimenting the natural scenery.

However, the higher she went, the more obstacles she faced, rocks, beasts, and even unknown creatures that even the most courageous of adventurers would quiver before. Even the smallest, unsuspecting creature, a tiny dragonfly passing by, attacked Xingyun mercilessly, with every attack they had.

Was this a test from the gods? Xingyun wondered as she dodged yet another arrow shot from the trees, while pinecones were launched at her at full speed.

Just as she thought she was safe, a sudden shadow cast upon her. Evil, screeching laughter echoed through the cliffs, the soft snow suddenly turning into a raging blizzard, obstructing Xingyun's vision.

“Little girl, you think you deserve the gods to allow you through? You’re weak, worthless, leave before I kill you! I will take over this mountain, and everyone shall fear and worship me!”

“Who are you?” Xingyun shouted, secretly shaking in her leather boots, “Show yourself! Wherever you are!”

“We are the Four Evils, Tao Tie, Hun Dun, Qiong Qi, and Tao Wu. Turn away and run if you value your life!”

Xingyun felt herself begin to boil with rage, “Step aside! The gods are not for you to disrespect like that!”

“Xingyun...”

“Ground Raiser!”

“Do not fear, I will lend you my strength. You can do this. You can protect the Mountain.”

A strong force surged into her body and a sword materialized in her hand, her hand grasped around the weapon. All of a sudden, Xingyun genuinely felt like a hero, one that deserves to scale Huangshan.

With a war cry, Xingyun leaped towards the four evils, dodging and slashing her way through. Qiong Qi flew to the air, baring his tiger fangs and his wings as he emitted waves from his gaping mouth, attempting to beat Xingyun by wrecking her nerves. A destined warrior doesn’t crumble that easily, and with a shake of a head, Xingyun returned to her charging, strong state.

Hun Dun sang a mismatched tune, causing Xingyun to flinch and cover her ears and the terrible sound. The growls that couldn’t even be described as music blocked Xingyun from coming closer, a barrier appearing before her eyes. She went into a fighting stance, charging the power, and lunged, cutting through the veil and landing a hit on Hundun’s chest, golden liquid dripping out from its wound. Hundun fell back from the impact, shocked that a mortal had such endurance and strength.

Tao Wu stretched its tail, doing a spinning attack to sweep Xingyun off her feet. Xingyun landed on Tao Wu’s back, digging the blade into its back. The demon howled in pain sparks surrounding it as it dissipated into thin air, never to be heard of again.

The Four, now Three Evils gasped in fear, staring at the little girl who just killed their comrade. Qiong Qi was the first to return to his senses, lunging at Xingyun. Xingyun watched, her life flashing over her eyes, ready to receive the coup de grace from the monster...

BANG!

An explosion blew the monsters into pieces, leaving only Xingyun and the proud Ground Raiser.

“You did well, dear Xingyun. I shall now bring you to the village of Huang Shan. They shall know of your feat. Climb onto me and I will bring you there.” Ground Raiser crouched and allowed Xingyun to leap onto the comfy feathers.

Xingyun peered down as the small wooden huts came into view, pixies, fairies, and magical animals alike chattering and frolicking in the plains, laughter, and cheers echoing through. As Ground Raiser landed, the abundance of flora and fauna surprised Xingyun. A small pixie flew over and passed her a berry, beckoning her to eat it. She popped it into her mouth, and immediately a sweet burst of juice covered her tongue, changing tastes every second, from apples to oranges, from oranges to cherries.

“Everyone, come meet your savior, Xingyun! She defeated the Four Evils and brought peace to our land.”

The creatures gathered around, thanking their hero. A group of fairies even placed a flower crown on her head. Xingyun had never felt this appreciated in her life.

That night, Xingyun and the magical creatures surrounded the village, around a crackling bonfire, celebrating the Amber Hero, as they called her, everyone drinking delicious stew, feasting on roasts, biting into multiple heavenly delicacies. Xingyun was the queen of them all, smiling as they crowded around, thanking her for all the work she did.

5000 years later, archaeologists found a gigantic piece of amber, and in it perfectly preserved a beautiful woman, silky smooth hair brushing over her qipao, a shining sword lying next to her. She seemed to not age, despite tests on her body reported she lived till 90 years old. The burial seemed simple on the surface, too simple for an amber encased woman. They continued digging, finding plants and artifacts they have yet to see in any site and unable to be left as deep as it is by humans. She was identified by a name carved into the blade “Xingyun, The Amber Hero”.

Deciphering progress took place as people learned more about the Amber Hero. To this day, the song, now proven to be true, was still spreaded and would spread for an eternity.

“The stars and clouds share the same sky,
For they climbed beyond the mountains high,
Yellow trails she would go up and down,
And so humble, not a sound!”

A Piglon's Depression

St. Stephen's College, Cheng, Hong Ting Anson – 12

Legends has said, far beyond the boarders of China, beyond the villages, lies a mountain unlike any other—Huangshan. The mountain was abandoned when Chinese people have learnt of its enchantment on the mountain, some believe it doesn't exist, others believe that it is evil. When the Chinese had left the tall mountain, a creature unlike any other, awoken from its slumber.....

The story begins with the most feared animal that once ruled China's land, creatures like dragons and tigers were threatened by its strength and evilness, being the bullet to all living creatures. Surprisingly, its newest form in present time is a pig, but if you walked the earth before the beginning of time, it is called a Piglon.

Unlike the weak and lazy "pigs" we know today, a Piglon was a corruption of pigs. Piglons had wide and large bodies, their eyes were like telescopes, their hands were the size of human heads, they wore heavy medieval armour and their faces were covered with bruises and scars. Their strength is imaginary, unreal as they could lift a dragon with one hand.

They were powerful but very cruel to other creatures, Piglons were arrogant and rude, they only cared about their own species, seeing others as dirt. The entire land of creatures had grown hatred to Piglons, but no one dared to challenge their inevitable power. The creatures thought, after an extensive discussion, they summoned Buddha for advice and there he responded,

"I understand your problems, but I cannot punish them as their strength and personality are powered by cruelty, they're born with their cruelty, but I can fool them as they aren't educated."

Understanding how they could trick the Piglons, the creatures of China told Buddha their plan.

A few days had gone by and Buddha gave a message to all the Piglons in China, that they must bring out one volunteer that would be entered into a game.

The Piglons laughed at Buddha, calling him a fool and idiot to challenge the kind. That was when Buddha smiled,

"Once you had brought out your champion, he will determine your fate."

The Piglons were confused of what he said and asked,

"What do you mean?"

And Buddha responded exactly as how the creatures had asked him to,

"If your champion succeeds, you will all have my power, but if he loses, you all would lose your power."

Hearing this, the Piglons raised their axes at Buddha, threatening him that they would kill him after their champion succeeds. On Monday, the Piglons met with Buddha at a steep on Huangshan, the Piglons had chosen their strongest Piglon named Bulwark. Buddha waved his hand and a passageway to clouds opened, he went in and Bulwark followed behind him...

Buddha stood in front of Bulwark, the Pignon chuckled at Buddha,

“You’ve made a mistake challenging us!” Bulwark said.

Buddha ignored him and waved his hand again, three clouds appeared in front of him and morphed together into a snake. Buddha explained the rules of the challenge, that Bulwark must find the venom of the snake and bring it to Buddha, while he mustn’t receive any help. Bulwark must journey to the dark cave on the side of Huangshan.

Bulwark understood and asked to begin, Buddha smiled and Bulwark was teleported to a grass pit in the middle of nowhere.

Bulwark first arrived at a raging river, he scouted the area, the waves were as tall as trees, it was impossible to ride across the river.

“Need help?” A voice called behind Bulwark.

Bulwark turned and saw a tiger beside him. He took one more look at the river and turned back at the tiger,

“Quickly.”

The tiger walked towards the front of the river and gave a loud roar, as if twelve earthquakes were happening beside him. All of a sudden, the water stopped, a path opened in the middle of the river, revealing the opposite side of the river. Without hesitation, Bulwark bolted towards the path, taking one last turn, the tiger disappeared.

Not long after, Bulwark arrived at a enormous ditch, just like a “black-hole”. There weren’t any bridges that connected the two mountains. Bulwark spotted an eagle flying above his head, annoyed from the bird, he grabbed the eagle with his huge hands,

“What do you want?” Bulwark asked the eagle.

“To.....To.....help...” The eagle responded nervously.

The eagle offered to help Bulwark to fly across the ditch and in return he could help him defeat an “evil beast”. Bulwark agreed and the eagle flew Bulwark across the ditch and landed on the other side,

The eagle was delighted and asked Bulwark to help him defeat the beast, but like the cruel and mean Pignons, he double-crossed the eagle, clutching the eagle in his large hands, throwing the eagle down into the ditch,

“No,” Bulwark said.

Down a spiral staircase, Bulwark had arrived at the dark cave, the cave was ghost-quiet, silent. Bulwark entered the cave, it’s dark and quiet atmosphere was like an abandoned asylum. At the end of the cave, Bulwark saw a gold and shining light, hanged on the wall was a snake shaped statue. Bulwark knew he had won, taking out a leather bag from his pocket, he squeezed the venom from the snake’s mouth, slowly dripping into the bag.

When Bulwark had returned to Buddha, he threw the bag of venom onto the ground, claiming that he had won and demanded for Buddha to turn him into a god. Buddha agreed but asked one last question—whether or not Bulwark had received any assistance through the journey. Bulwark felt a sense of fear and replied, “No”.

At that moment, Buddha claimed that Bulwark was lying to him.

Bulwark denied that he hadn’t told Buddha the truth.

Bulwark suddenly understood that Buddha was the animals, he had morphed into the tiger and the eagle, to test if whether or not Bulwark would cheat. Buddha stats that the Piglons had lost the game, and he must take away all the power they have.

As time moved on, centuries had past, followed my millenniums. The Piglons first lost their strength, then their abilities, then their intelligence. Now, from the mistakes of their past generations, Piglons had slowly morphed into lazy and weak pigs. As tourists point at the pigs for their stupidity, they would always remember to never make the same mistake as their elders had once made, to never lie again, to never be cruel.

Farewell

St. Stephen's College, Cheung, Yi Tung Kristy – 15

25 years of doing the same repetitive tasks of his job, Mr. Elliott Sun thought he might have gotten used to it. The day always began with him sitting in front of the laptop, reading emails while solving unimportant problems from clients, sometimes he had to socialize with managers from other companies, but this tedious job had never made him so sick and depressed.

It was as if he were a machine being restarted every day, he knew who he was, what he had to do with his job, but he couldn't control his emotions and loneliness was like a monster that he couldn't fight off.

Deep inside his heart he felt as if something was missing, a very important component of his life, had suddenly vanished in thin air. The emptiness felt as if a house was without lights, spacious, yet dark, cold and empty. His days were miserable, so he went back to drinking at night which kept the cycle going on and on.

Weeks of drinking has caused his sensitivity to decrease, sometimes he would drive to work feeling groggy and dizzy. Yet again he was drunk driving to work, but, he wasn't so lucky this time. 'BEEP!' an enormous lorry was driving towards him, and the next split second before Elliott could react, the car crashed with a loud thump, and he fainted.

The car crash landed Elliott in a coma for an entire, the doctors had expected the worst and informed his only relative contactable, his ex-wife.

★

A cool breeze blew on his face as the birds chirruping surrounded him. He opened his eyes and was astonished by the beautiful scenery surrounding him, the sun shone on every inch of the mighty verdant trees while the sunlight resembled a spectrum of colors. For the first time in a long time, he felt extremely awake, feeling invigorated and refreshed, as if his whole soul and body had been purified and he was granted a new life.

A loud rattle abruptly disturbed the silence, resembling the noise of an old man's coughing, he turned around and realized it was made from the turning engine of a shuttle bus. He scanned the surroundings and found that this was a parking lot for shuttle buses, meanwhile a group of tourists were getting off the bus. He noticed a sign placed on the front window with black block words written on it, 'TO THE SCENIC AREA OF ZHANGJIAJIE'.

"Daddy! Daddy!!" These two words warming yet passionate, had completely melted his heart. He turned around and hugged his lovely daughter in his arms, oh how much he missed her. He hugged her so tight that she could have melted in his arms, yet his 14 year girl struggled away from his tight grasp.

"Oh, where have you been, you've got me scared to death! Lily! I miss you so much!" Their reunion had instantly lit up his hopes of life, Lily had been the whole of his life, and ever since he divorced with his wife, he had been living with Lily.

"What do you mean, we came here this morning together riding the shuttle bus, why are you getting so emotional? I just went to the toilet and when I came back, I saw you staring at that shuttle bus?" Bewildered by her dad's actions, she placed her hand on Elliott's forehead.

Lily started unfolding a map, "Well daddy, so I just checked the map and if we go this way, we can ride the shuttle bus to Tianmenshan which is really famous for its 'gate to heaven'. Oh, and also the misty mountains are definitely gonna be amazing!! Let's go or we're not gonna make it!"

It was a hot summer day where only thin streaks of clouds trailed across the azure sky, however it was more than comfortable to go under the canopy to walk in the arms of mother nature.

There were countless quartzite–sandstone formations soaring up into the sky, with the jagged edges and tiny bushes of green on it, the whole of it somehow resembled hundreds of giant stone fingers with moss built on it. It was breathtaking to see the panoramic view, a view that one could never imagine – realizing that they are nothing more than a tiny insignificant dust in this idyllic, sweeping world.

Elliott held Lily in his arms as they silently looked over the dazzling mountains, he sighed for being so foolish, he was ashamed for being so ignorant, for drinking, for wasting his life. He felt content, to have his daughter with him, they were together, finally, to see this glamorous scenery, and he asked for nothing more.

After half an hour, they continued their journey and boarded another shuttle bus to Tianmendong, Lily was so excited on their journey before they reached the scenery. Elliott could see she intentionally kept looking away from him, and she was blinking back tears.

Tianmendong didn't disappoint them. Looking upwards, they could see two enormous pieces of precipice joint together where the corner formed a natural hole, which looked like a gate in the two cliffs. To reach the hole, they had to walk 999 steps of stairs.

Lily held his hand, and together they took their first step, then they kept going upwards. Elliott felt a sense of sorrow as he looked at her forceful smile.

“Daddy, so how was today? I have always wanted to come here, to see the amazing mountains and to reveal its mysterious face. Well, I guess I had made the right choice.” Lily exclaimed.

“Of course, I had so much fun today darling, this has to be the happiest day of my life. I wish I could stay up here the rest of my life! Wouldn't it be great!” He said this while turning around to take a glimpse of the mountains below them, it was almost sunset, the sun–drenched mountains were covered in a warm yellow gradient.

Lily turned away, trying to escape looking directly in Elliott's face, and said, “Daddy, I figured out it's time to say goodbye...”

“What do you mean goodbye, darling, huh,” He forced a calm tone, while choking back tears.

“It's time to go back to reality, you have to accept the truth that I...died.” Lily closed her eyes while saying the last word as tears trickled down her cheeks.

Elliott's felt as if he were hit once again by a car, his eyes squeezed shut due to the intense pressure as if his mind were travelling light–speed in a boundless tunnel, then a high–pitched wail stabbed his ears. Then clips came back to his mind, he remembered the moment when he rushed to hospital, just to open the door and realize that he was too late. He saw his girl on the bed, the bedroom was all deadly quiet with only his ex–wife holding Lily's hand sobbing quietly

Elliott and Lily were already halfway through to the top, but Elliott broke down, his face went wine red, and he barely held himself together.

“Daddy, you know I am so happy today to be with you once again, it is definitely a gift to go out with you! The misty mountains are amazing, and look at the view down there, this is definitely a place I would recommend everyone to come!” Elliott wiped off his tears, Lily was smiling so beautifully.

“You know, I am so glad that I can have you, my lovely angel, I love you so much daddy! So I would be really really sad if I see you devastated, drinking all night, grieving over me.” They arrived at the top, she stopped and looked deeply into his red puffy eyes, “Thank you, I love you so much.” She hugged him so hard, yet Elliott hoped this moment would never end.

He gathered his courage and said, “I love you too darling.”

“Goodbye daddy, I promise you I’ll be a good girl.” Lily barely said the last phrase.

Elliott could never gather enough courage to say goodbye, but he said it, “good...bye...”

She looked at him once again, peaceful and satisfied with that answer. Her legs started turning into golden dust, then her body, then her head, she looked in him with the last possible strength, then finally vanished into the gate of heaven.

The sunset was almost over, as the sun shone once again on Elliott, he felt defeated and forlorn, he waited for his time to vanish. As he saw the sun right in front of him, he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Mr. Sun! Mr. Sun!” he heard the voice of a woman, he opened his eyes, feeling groggy and unreal, he saw a white ceiling. He didn’t know whether that was a dream or not, but for now he had set his next goal, to go to Zhangjiajie to find his daughter.

Huang Shan

St. Stephen's College, Kwok, Hiu Yan – 15

“Honey, I’m going to Huang Shan to do a little exploring. I haven’t exercised for a while, maybe that’s why I’m feeling weak. For the millionth time, will you come with me?”

It was a beautiful day in the midst of May. The warm spring sun was shining brightly in the company of the lilacs in the garden, their flowers wide and in a large variety of colors.

The athletic wife of businessman millionaire Robert Wu, also known as Millie Lin, was begging him to climb up the mountains with her again—for the millionth time since their marriage. It’s not that he didn’t want to, it’s because he physically wasn’t able to—he’d spent his entire life with his nose buried in a book and rotting behind his office desk.

“I’m good. Be careful though, you’re still sick.” Robert replied sheepishly from the sofa with his legs crossed, reading a newspaper.

“I’ll back in two hours, don’t worry.” After giving him a peck on the cheek, she grabbed a bottle of sunscreen and set off.

Climbing up the mountain was an absolute thrill. There’s nothing better than seeing the neon green trees and nature awakening after a snowy winter. Many insects have left their state of diapause, butterflies have come out of hibernation, and bees are back buzzing around busily searching for nectar. Before she knew it, she arrived at the peak of Huang Shan. The view up there never ceased to amaze Millie, the air was particularly refreshing, with sudden swirls of wind ruffling the trees and flowers. The cliff rolls deeps into what seems like a never-ending bottomless pit, with mysterious mist filling it up as if it’s a gigantic bathtub.

It wasn’t really an exhausting run, but when she returned home, she felt as if she was drained of energy. Her muscles were sore as she drove herself back home, this hadn’t happened in a long time.

“An ice pack will do the job. It’s not a big deal, don’t worry.” That’s what the doctor said, when Millie had paid him a visit. He’d laughed at her, apparently finding the fact that she had freaked out so much over nothing amusing.

At first, Millie’s muscles did recover after a few days of resting, but over some time, they didn’t even heal at all. The muscles stayed sore and weak for months, and with Millie getting impatient and exercising, it eventually started to spread across her entire body.

When Millie fell down the stairs at her very own house, she had enough. She booked an appointment with the hospital for a body check, and after a week of waiting, she received a phone call.

Nervously, Millie walked into the doctor’s office. Her heart was pounding.

Clomp. Clomp. Millie’s ears perked straight up immediately the second she heard footsteps approaching the room.

“Millie Lin? Nice to meet you. I’m Dr. Edward.” He extended his hand towards Millie, and she cautiously reached out to shake it.

Why is he introducing himself in such a manner? She leaned back.

It’s going to be fine. Robert had said that to her in attempt to calm her down before she left the house; *it’s going to be just fine.*

“According to your symptoms and some scans from the physical examination the physician has done last month, it appears that you have been primarily diagnosed with the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis— also shortly known as ALS.” The doctor paused, giving Millie some time to absorb the news.

Millie’s jaw dropped. ALS. The deadly disease that causes severe muscle weakness, one that will lead to difficulty chewing, talking, walking and ultimately, to death itself. *This simply can’t be true...*

Her head stormed with all sorts of questions— questions not of curiosity but dread. *Does this mean I can’t do sports ever again? Can I ever hike up the Huang Shan mountains again?* These thoughts horrified her— they were simply part of her soul.

“Well, we need more checks to further investigate your case, if that’s fine with you?” Dr. Edward could see her face turning pale. It was gruesome news, and he very often has to battle this pulse of empathy to prevent his professionalism breaking down.

Millie didn’t answer. Her mind had already zoned out far away from the hospital.

The road was dimly alight as she pulled up the driveway of her mansion.

Robert can be seen sitting behind his desk doing some paperworks. “Honey! I was just about to call you. How was the appointment? Did you receive some medication? What d—” Robert stopped abruptly when he saw the tears trickling down Millie’s cheeks. He could tell something was wrong— Millie hadn’t cried in a long time.

One hour. 60 minutes after Millie had spilled the beans on the appointment. Every second passed by as if he had counted every one of them, time passed by like sand from an hourglass falling down one by one. The news hit him like a truck— *how is this possible?*

“Robert, I want one thing from you.” Millie sniffed, gathered herself up, and smiled sadly at him after sitting in silence for ten minutes.

“Say it. I’ll do it, if it means making you feel better.” Robert replied, determined to remove some pain and weight off her back.

“I want you to start exercising for me and get fit and healthy. I want you to one day, no matter how long it takes, carry me up the mountain so I can see my home again. Please, Robert.”

Robert froze. He didn’t have the capability to do it. He’s too overweight to achieve that. This was something he had promised himself to never do, so that he wouldn’t have to suffer.

He was about to reject it when Millie’s face dropped, turning from full of hope and expectancy to agony. He had to do it. He couldn’t decline her only request. “I’ll try my best.” Robert unwillingly forced out the words, against his will. He’s a man of his word —now that he’d said it, he had to do it.

“One condition only. You’ll guide me there. Be easy on me though.” Robert added. Beside him, a bright smile lit up on Millie’s face; even though she has lost her life-long hobby, at least she has achieved her life-long dream. Maybe this wouldn’t be as bad...

1 year later

Her muscles had become so paralyzed she could hardly stand on her own. It's tragic, but Millie's not feeling as pessimistic as she thought she would be. Robert has lost over half of his weight from a year ago, and he became so strong he could run the entire mountain trail in just an hour. He has also been on a continuous diet ever since and it's been a whole thirteen months since he last drank a bottle of Coke!

Today, however, is a special day for the couple. Robert is going to be carrying Millie up the mountain for the first time in his life. For Robert, it has taken months of strenuous hard work to reach this day, and for Millie, it has taken decades of dreaming.

Jumping on her wheelchair, they head off to the mountain. A wave of nostalgia hit Millie, it's been a whole year since she was last here. *Oh, how she missed this place!* She carefully climbs onto Robert's back as he slowly walks towards the mountain. With Millie pointing here and there, directing him to what used to be her typical path up the mountain, they eventually reached the top.

On the way up, new flowers grew, while some have wilted, gentle waves of spring breeze ruffle their hair as they climbed higher and higher. At the top, the view is as astonishing as ever. Perhaps it's because it has been quite some time before she last visited the mountain, but she couldn't help but feel a sense of pride being able to reach up to this point. It's not only Robert's effort— she has spent a lot of effort coaching him and strengthening him. Even though her death was just around the corner, at least she got to see the view up here once again. A mysterious cloud of mist stirred up at the bottom of the cliff. *Who knows what exists underneath?*

Robert, on the other hand, collapses and lies down on the neon green grass. Winds of victory hit him in his face repeatedly, and he sighs in relief. He did it, he did the impossible. He wonders what would've happened if he didn't agree to Millie's request— would he still be rotting away behind his desk disappointing his wife? The view here is amazing. He's glad he went out of his comfort zone and dedicated his mind into achieving what he thought was impossible, in return, he got to discover the amazing world outside.

Azalea

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Hui Yan Grace – 15

“Can you tell me a bed–time story?” A boy asked an old man.

The old man thought for a while, “A hundred years ago, Huangshan was heaven with extraordinary animals and alluring sunset scenery...” Birds flew freely through the sky like spring welcoming them with a pleasant hug. Nature sang melodiously as to bid farewell to the frosty winter.

Once, a couple climbed to the top of Huangshan. The male proposed to the female. Unfortunately, the female rejected.

“Sorry, I... I don’t think we are suitable for each other.”

“That’s impossible! We have been together for 3 years!” He confessed.

“I don’t know... There is no true love between us, at least not for me.”

“No...no, no! We have love...” He kept denying the truth while holding her hands harshly.

“Take your hands off me! Why can’t you just accept the truth! I don’t have feelings for you!” She struggled.

The fierce anger built up in his mind, without thinking, he pushed the girl off the cliff cruelly. An anguishing scream echoed like a dreadful alarm till it weakened away into the horrible depths. In just a second, Huangshan was overwhelmed with grief and mourning. The sky sobbed heavily, the mountain top was covered by thunderstorms with no ends. Since then, Huangshan has never been arrayed by a golden ray of sunlight.

“So is Huangshan still cursed?” The boy asked.

“Huangshan is no longer cursed, since an incident that happened thirty years ago...” The old man explained.

Since Huangshan had been cursed, no one could ever climb close to the top of the mountain. Villagers believed that only the one who could climb to the top of the mountain with courage could shake heaven and break the curse. People from all around the world who loved an adventure came to **challenge** Huangshan. Though they never knew that they would pay such a heavy price for this adventure.

The old man looked sorrowfully at the sunset painting on the wall and said, “There was once a foolish man who failed to protect his lover **because of this adventure**.” He mumbled.

“Witnessing a dazzling sunset with you is the biggest wish in my life,” Natalie said, smiling graciously to Christopher while holding azaleas in her hand, her favorite flower. Poems and legends over the past mentioned Huangshan’s splendid sunset view. Remembering Natalie’s words, Christopher regardless of the risks decided to climb Huangshan.

“Christopher and Natalie packed sufficiently for their climb. After a long–distance of traveling, they were finally at the foot of the mountain.” The old man said gruffly.

Christopher looked up startled, sweat kept on falling from his palms. The tremendous layer of a grim overcoat covering Huangshan was a nightmare. Raindrops were bitter like bitter gourd, dry and inspirited. Plants wilted sighing, hopeless, and desperate. At the foot of the mountain, there was a direction sign with ivy curling around, roughly written:

Think wisely before you climb.

Overwhelmed with fear, Christopher swallowed as if it was the last second of his life. He walked, he talked, he smiled to Natalie like he always did, but inside he was dying horribly. He pretended to stay strong in front of Natalie. There were no fences nor steps but only a feeble rope that was connected tightly throughout the mountain which was made by the other climbers. The cliff was beside them while walking and the fragile rope was their only hope of survival. They climbed for three hours, barely even half the mountain, but their energy and supplies were running out. With the extreme weather getting more and more unbearable, climbing seemed to be more and more impossible. They stopped to rest.

“Let’s turn back, we cannot climb to the top.” Natalie panicked.

“Don’t give up! I think we are...almost there.” Swiping off the water droplets on his watch. Trying to be professional, but his body stiffened in fear.

A lightning struck out into insane zig-zags from the dark sky, a thunder roared overhead like the fury of the gods.

“Christopher! This is not the time to argue!” Natalie was frightened by the thunder.

Christopher had been keeping a secret during this journey. His hands were shaking constantly, holding an exquisite ring firmly in his pocket.

“We cannot risk our —” Before Natalie could finish her sentence, Christopher slipped from the wet ground. Swinging left and right on the edge of the cliff.

“Christopher! Don’t let go of my hands, hold tight!” Screaming her throat out, tearing the air into a great shard of glass. She laid on the ground and tried to pull him up while tightly grabbing the stones beside her. Her hands were full of scratches, her face tightened while gritting her teeth. After a few tries, she pulled Christopher up and he was finally safe.

“Thank God you’re alive, told you not to come up this mountain...” said Natalie.

“Thank you love for saving me.”

She laid prone on the floor, heaving from the thin oxygen and exertion after using all her energy to pull Christopher. As she was standing up, she felt the world around her spin and dizziness slammed against her fragile body. Natalie slipped, her hands scrambling for something to grab on. All the physics theories suddenly applied to her and she lost her balance. “No—” Christopher tried to catch Natalie’s hands. His hands kept reaching out, but he could only sense hails landing on his hands. Unfortunately, Natalie fell into the depth of the mountain. At that moment, everything stopped. Hails and raindrops were like slow motion. Thunderstorms were punishing nature anxiously. Raindrops hit nature brutally although nature had already begged for forgiveness.

“The foolish man burst into tears. Tears followed the raindrops and dropped into endless depths of the mountain. His screeched, yelled and shrieked, though this couldn’t express his bitterness. His hands stroked his chest heavily, leaving tons of wounds but all of these didn’t matter anymore.” The old man groaned.

“What happened to the man after?” The boy was curious.

“He laid down on the ground for two days and two nights. There were no tears left for him even though he wanted to cry his heart out. His body was dehydrated like an empty bottle.”

Christopher walked back to the village and became the first person who survived the mountain. He wasn’t proud of his reputation. He hated Huangshan.

After twelve years...

Christopher became a famous mountain climber. He traveled to different scenic places to capture sunset photos. However, it was never enough to fill up his sadness. Every year on 12th December, he went to Natalie’s grave. Put down azaleas and photos that he had taken. For twelve years, he hadn’t been late.

“This is my twelfth time visiting you. This year, I went to Switzerland, Greece...” He quavered. Tears raced down his cheek. Great sobs escaped him, and he bowed on his knees with shaking hands. “Natalie! I miss you so much. I watched all these sunsets by myself, do you know how much pain I’m in?” He bawled.

After visiting Natalie, Christopher plucked up his courage and decided to climb Huangshan again. The second climb was much easier than the first one. He adapted to extreme weather faster and used different skillful techniques to overcome challenges. He kept going even though nature was blocking his way. His action touched the heart of the Lord. The overcast sky covering the mountain top seemed to disappear which made the climbing easier. To his surprise, he was able to climb to the mountain top.

Rays of sunlight shone on his cold face. He closed his eyes as the sunlight was so strong. He felt the warm balmy sunshine. The sun cast golden rays down upon the clouds of billowing smoke, turning them fire red. It was the most breath-taking sunset he had ever seen. There was an array of azaleas. Thousands of azaleas were painted on the mountain top, blossoming spiritually with diverse colors. Christopher’s eyes were filled to the brim with tears. For the first time, he cried with delight. Birds started to chirp beautifully. Monkeys were impatient to watch the dazzling view when they all climbed up to the trees. Trees were embraced by the wind. Nature was filled with verve again after a hundred years.

“Afterward, Huangshan no longer had extreme weather, but only layers of mist.” The old man finished.

The boy had already slept sweetly and soundly with his blanket over him. The old man looked over to the sunset photos on the wall he had taken. He took out something from the drawer — an exquisite ring and a sunset photo from Huangshan.

Filling Their Shots

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Ka Hei Heidi – 15

It was a busy day in the Wang household. As usual, Mr and Mrs Wang was busy hustling around, frantically checking their phones. “One of my clients just left! Excuse me? How dare he walk away like this—” “ Oh for gods sake not again—”

Jing groans as he pulled his covers over him, trying to block out the yelling. Just a normal summer day in the Wang household. *Ugh why can't he just have a quiet morning without the whole world buzzing about sales and stocks?* Unable to fall back asleep, he sat up as the sunlight penetrated through the blinds and glanced outside to a jungle of concrete and steel skyscrapers. He supposed most people would consider this Shenzhen view beautiful, but instead he longed to wake up to mountains and seas.

“Jing!” A loud booming voice disrupted his thoughts, his frowning father was standing in the doorway. Uh oh, he knew that look only too well. He jumped up and strolled out, desperate to avoid conversation. Unfortunately, he wasn't quick enough, his father pulled him back and said, “Jing, starting from tomorrow you are attending our business workshop, so go and prepare – no buts.”

Jing rolled his eyes and scoffed, “Dad, for the last time, I am NOT spending my summer nor my future as a broker, and don't expect me to take over your corporation because let's face it, both you and I know I'm not made for it.”

Jing flopped back onto his bed and sighed. Staring at his blank ceiling, the only image in his mind was that dull office life.

The next morning, he was whisked away into a shiny car by two men in suits as soon he swallowed the last spoon of his cereal. He had just reached the front door when Mr Wong's stern face appeared.

As soon as he arrived the workshop, it was absolutely everything he had imagined. For several hours, his instructor droned on and on about numbers and stocks. Of course, it was so stupid of Jing to expect anything more.

After what felt like forever, Jing was finally released, leaving with one piece of precious knowledge after a complete waste of his morning: he was never coming back here again, and his hatred for stocks somehow managed to increase drastically.

The minute Jing got home, he browsed the internet for anything— anything at all to escape this absolute nuttiness. And there it was, in big flashy letters— “HuangShan Photography Tour”. Perfect! He once dreamed to become a photographer, much to his parents' dismay, but that was ages ago, perhaps he would be able to convince them now?

It has been a long time since Jing has been in the forest. It hums with life all around him. Jing trudged on with his camera clutched tightly. He took a deep breath, allowing the fresh air flow freely into his lungs. This, this was where he belonged, not some dim, cluttered office with depressing stacks of papers. He wandered around, taking a variety of shots, but before he knew it, time had flown by. The scenery around him had changed so much that it was nearly sunset now, the sun dipping below the horizon to make way for the moon.

He returned home and Jing's parents completely freaked out when he mentioned, “wildlife photographer”.

“Have you gone bonkers— you're just going to throw away your entire future for such an unstable job?!”

“Listen Mom—”

“And after 19 years you come here babbling about being a photographer?!”

They screeched hysterically, loud enough for the entire building to hear. By the end of the third sentence, it was quite surprising that the amount of steam pouring out of their ears hadn't set off the fire alarm. The shrieking and the bellowing kept cutting Jing off.

"And exactly how many people do you think succeeds in these— these onerous, toilsome jobs?! Fine, but don't you crawl back here begging us for money after your joyful little career hits the dust!"

"Fine!"

The next day, Jing woke up in the dawn before the sun barely rose. He went to the station and took off to Huangshan, where his tour would officially take place. He met several others with huge expensive-looking cameras.

As they got higher and higher, nothing met Jing's gaze as he looked down, but clouds and mist swirling around greeting them. It was tiresome but amazing, nonetheless. He wanted to capture every single detail around him – the misty mountain, spectacular rocks and the seas of clouds hovering across the peaks.

A large brick arch announced an idyllic village, and beyond that was clusters of brick houses. Jing exhaled, a small smile forming on his face, he had a feeling he could capture a lot of beautiful shots here. Strolling around the village, his gaze landed on a man crouching down, holding a camera. The man's face held an intense look of concentration with his camera held steadily in his hands, the lens pointed towards a baby fox.

The shutter clicked.

The photographer immediately sat down, reviewing the photos. Unable to contain his curiosity, he walked over and asked, "Excuse me, are you a photographer, too?" He just nodded.

The man then invited Jing to sit down and introduced himself as Jordan, a wildlife photographer who was here to take photos for a competition.

Suddenly, Jordan turned to Jing with a hopeful glint in his eyes. "Hey! I just had an idea. Why don't you tag along this summer and I'll teach you a thing or two about some skills I've picked up over time?"

It was so unexpected that it took a solid minute for Jing to comprehend what he just heard before nodding vigorously to this offer.

The summer went by in a blur, Jing had the most amazing time of his life along with Jordan, who taught him everything he knew. But eventually, summer ended, which also meant their adventures had come to a halt. He went home determined to pursue a career as a wildlife photographer.

Having spent a better portion of his time going back planning out an entire speech, Jing still felt rather nervous as he arrived home.

"Hi dad. I have something I want to tell you..." His voice came out small. Upon seeing Jing, he gave him a brisk nod, features impassive.

Mr Wang interrupted, removing his glasses and cleaning them on his shirt. He said, "Son, I know you like photography, but you can't turn this into a career. Quite frankly, I'm tired of hearing about this. We've laid your life out perfectly for you. Why won't you appreciate that?"

He glowered at Jing with such distaste that Jing lowered his gaze for a brief moment. His mom chimed in, "He's right, you know. You should appreciate what you have now. Don't you want to be successful?"

Jing felt like pulling his hair out in frustration.

“This isn’t even about money or gratefulness! This is about my choices! Why should I follow to your ridiculous lifestyles so I can throw my life away? I don’t need a stock empire; I want to travel the world and be a photographer! I met someone while I was in Huangshan, and he’s a photographer too! He made money by selling his photos and publishing books. I can do that. It’s not going to be as lavish as a securities company, but I’ll live. I’ve told you about my dreams to be a photographer, yet you don’t respect my decisions and force your ideal life onto me. Imagine this: you really wanted to be a lawyer, but grandpa wants you to be a broker. Would you really follow his instructions willingly?”

His father’s face twisted.

This quarrel went on for ages, but Jing could do this all day if it means having his parents’ acceptance. Finally, Mr Wang could go no further, he simply sighed and caved in.

“Fine”, he said, “But you are expected to succeed, I will not tolerate failure, nor will I provide you a living if your career fails.”

His dreams were going to come true!

6 years later Jing was walking around in a large exhibit. He stopped in front of a framed photograph of two otters. Underneath these pictures was a small tag, bearing the words *Wang Jing* in an elegant script.

He had finally opened his own gallery. 4 years ago, he started to publish his works in a series of wildly popular books. After the third instalment, a curator reached out to see if he would be interested in opening his very own gallery. Much to his delight, everything turned out just as he planned.

He let out a victorious sigh. After all these years of hard work, he’d proven to his parents that following his dreams and being a photographer can be just as successful as a stockbroker.

A Cure

St. Stephen's College, Lam, Yan Janice – 15

Gaping in amazement at the seas of clouds and fogs floating above the Yellow Mountains just under his foot, Noah finally perceived why An-hui people called themselves the villagers of Xanadu. He could imagine himself jumping off from the cliff and landing on a piece of mist. Although it was already his fourth hour of climbing the mountain since mid-afternoon, the sun hadn't started to descend as if the day was still at noon. The radiant, picturesque and celestial scenery stroked Noah's taut brain and relieved his uneasiness.

"Hey, what happened to your legs?" A girl interrupted Noah's leisurely hike by tapping his purple bruise on his ankle. She was about four feet tall, wearing a yellow button-down shirt with seaweed-colored pants, her outfit puzzled Noah as he'd never seen anyone wearing this kind of clothes.

"Hmm, nothing special." Noah pulled his trousers, so it was long enough to cover the bruise. There was actually a lot more bruises and scars over his legs.

"There must be something wrong with you." The little girl said. "I can give you my candy. But tell me your purpose of climbing as an exchange. Are you looking for Buddha?"

"No of course not!" Noah immediately denied despite the girl having guessed the truth. He didn't want to let others think he was naïve and still believed the folktale telling people they could make a wish if they saw Buddha, the mother of God on the peak of Yellow Mountain.

"Anyways. My name is Isa, nice to meet you." The girl said her words confidently and enthusiastically.

However, Noah was hesitant to reply. *It was just a coincidence, okay? A lot of people are called Isa, not just mama.* He told himself.

"Oh hi... shall we go?"

They squinted as they looked up toward the peak. It seemed like they were not really far away from the spot they desired to reach. Noah held the little girl's hand as they started to climb.

"What's your name?", "Noah."

"I am five, how about you?"

"Fourteen."

"Do you think I am annoying?"

"A little bit. "

"HEY! Then lemme tell you a joke... Once upon a time, there was a guy called Noah...", "Why are you using my name?" "It's just a coincidence, be chill. "

They began blabbering along their way up. Giggling could be heard every few seconds as they were climbing.

"Hey,"

"Yeah?"

“What’s the time right now?”

“I guess it’s 11 a.m. “

“Wait what?”

“I meant ...yeah, 11a.m. on 12 April 1939. Why do I have to lie? “

This shocked Noah as if he was about to die within a minute. His heart pumped vigorously and he was too stunned that he felt like he was unable to react. He could not believe what he had heard. *It must be ridiculous. The time machine has not even been invented yet. How would it be even possible that I had travelled to thirty years ago, when mama was just a five old girl.*

“No, I just wasn’t paying attention when you replied me, so yeah sorry.”

They continued to climb, as they almost reached the crest of the mountain, they began to climb a rugged staircase which headed to the summit. Noah tried his best to be calm and pretend nothing had happened while they were chatting, however, whenever he saw Isa’s face, he couldn’t help relating her to mama, they resembled each other’s facial features strongly that they must be the same person. But their personality was entirely different. *So, how did mama deteriorate so badly?*

Noah kept thinking until some noises from probably a bunch of kids interrupted them.

‘Okay, I think I should leave now.’ Isa said quietly.

Noah turned to Isa, as he was surprised of what Isa had said and her sudden change of emotions like she went through paradise and hell in a second, they met a bunch of kids heading down from above.

“Oh my gosh, ewww! It is Isa here.”

“Are you really going to find Buddha?”

“You dunce will never become rich no matter what.”

“Get back to your farm and feed the pigs”

“Shame on you.”

Those kids were probably the same age with Isa, however, their naiveness and innocence entirely disappeared as there were huge blades of malice in their words. *Oh hell, who taught them to say these spiteful words. They are probably only five, and well, they are too rude to continue being alive. Besides, they just ignored me. Hey! At least I am a teenage so shouldn’t they respect me a little bit more me huh?*

Not only Isa’s cheeks, but her whole face and ears also turned red. She didn’t say anything but seemed to accept what those bullies were saying. Meanwhile, she held Noah’s hand tightly as if she was about to use all her effort to crush Noah’s bones.

“STOP!” Noah shouted toward those kids as he peered down and stared at each of them anxiously. Maybe because of his voice change in the past few months, he had unconsciously made a hoarse roar, all the kids gaped at him and stopped talking at once.

Noah cleared his throat, suggesting to those kids to leave, ready to fling his palms at them should they approach them.

“Everything is okay now.” Noah bent down and consoled Isa’s nervousness and agitation by putting a hand on her shoulder. As if all her worries had been relieved at once, a drop of tear fell on her cheeks as she blinked after a few seconds Noah had talked to her.

“Okay yeah, I am fine now. Thanks.”

“Shall we continue?”

“Yeah, of course!”

They started to climb again; Isa’s smile was now even wider as she had become an even more gleeful and beautiful child. As they passed through several turns, they finally arrived at the peak.

Standing on top of Yellow Mountain definitely brought them a breathtaking striking spectacular view. Clouds were floating underneath, what you saw could really give an illusion that you had already landed in a paradise.

“Turns out Buddha doesn’t live here, I guess.” Isa said.

“Yeah... probably” Noah replied.

“But you know what, my wish has already come true. Cause I am wishing for a friend, and here you are. And I am very grateful for that.” Isa glanced at Noah as to express how happy she was.

They laid on each other. Maybe because of the long hours of climbing, Noah had an urge to yawn and stretch. He closed his eyes as to fully enjoy the subtle aromas and the sounds came from the cicadas. He breathed slowly and regularly as he’s ready to sleep.

Noah woke up on his bed in his house. His mother sat next to him, the bruises on his legs had disappeared, everything in his room was tidy and clean, as if sun had finally arrived their home and kicked those storm clouds away from his house.

She greeted him, “Good morning my darling, hope you had a good rest, prepared porridge for breakfast. Come join me.”

The abuse had stopped, he finally understood her pent-up burst of outrage that stemmed from her traumatic childhood.

Noah’s wish has come true.

Moop

St. Stephen's College, Wong, Chun Ning Lisa – 15

Scene 1

In the tranquility of a misty mountain, Heping village was a remote and peaceful village that was home to many animals. Centre Restaurant had been occupied, if not jam-packed, with many students and workers at this festive season called Friendship Day.

“Give me a basket of siumai and cha siu bao (roasted pork bun)” Monkey shouted.

This young monkey’s voice was insolent. He desperately wanted to feed his hungry stomach, but the restaurant was too busy to respond to him. Panda was the chef of Centre Restaurant. He was busy rolling the dough, skillfully assembling the fillings into the wrapper and putting it in the steamer. Thoughtlessly leaving the steamer unattended, he was too caught up in a chat with a regular customer in the restaurant. Until the burning smell invaded his nose, he came back and saw some spilled shrimp from the steamer. ‘Oh dear! My “har gows” are destroyed! I’m so sorry but I need time to remake it.’ Panda said embarrassingly.

Monkey could not wait anymore, he jumped up onto the table and ran into the kitchen. He screamed with his loudest voice, “Where’s my food? I waited for 10 minutes already!”

Panda’s frustration was met with monkey’s impatience. He tried to stop Monkey from entering the kitchen. Monkey jumped across Panda’s embrace and Panda pulled him from his tail. Monkey tried to kick but missed. Panda struck back but Monkey dodged flexibly. Their fight was witnessed by all other customers. Some were surprised by their combat skills and found it rather entertaining, while some tried to pull them aside.

“Your kungfu is not bad. Here goes my respect.” Monkey remarked wittily.

“Child, don’t be silly. If you make trouble again, you will be doomed.” Panda said seriously.

Scene 2

‘Attention everyone! We are calling for an emergency meeting. All of you please gather in the Middle Garden immediately!’ The village leader, old Deer announced. A sense of unease overwhelmed the villagers as the last emergency meeting called was when the previous village leader died. The situation sounded serious. Schools were suspended for half a day and restaurants were closed. All the villagers sat quietly and waited for the meeting to start.

‘Thank you for being on time. As you may be aware of the construction next to us, our homeland is now much in danger. This is the only place we can live but humans are encroaching upon us! We urge everyone to play their part in preserving our place and lives. We have sent a warning letter to humans, asking them to leave. If they do not follow our request, we will declare war!’

Old Deer stood on top of the stage in confidence, while the murmuring arose from the crowd.

‘Human won’t listen to us.’

‘Should every one of us participate in the war?’

‘They have guns and swords, but we have four limbs or some even less. How do we fight humans?’ the villagers grumbled.

‘Don’t you remember our Kungfu skills? Hands and fists are the strongest tools we have. We will send the best of our kind to defeat them. Any suggestions?’ Old Deer asked.

Silence travelled through the air until someone interrupted.

'I want to be in the battle. Let me be one of the representatives.' Panda volunteered and all of the villagers were surprised by Panda's bravery.

'Very well, Panda. We still need two more representatives.'

'Old Deer, I recommend Monkey to join me. His Kung Fu skills are excellent.' Panda added.

Monkey's face blushed as everyone stared at him. 'It's my honor to join the battle with Panda.'

Monkey softened his voice as he spoke. 'Oh, maybe we can ask Ostrich to join as well? He is the best in combat!' Sheep mama suggested.

'But doesn't Ostrich live high up in the Heping mountain? How are we supposed to find him?' Snake asked.

'Monkey and I will persuade Ostrich. Count on us!' Panda said.

'Let's put our hands together for Panda and Monkey!' Old Deer looked relieved, with weariness across his wrinkly face as he walked down the stage.

Scene 3

The day after the emergency meeting, Panda and Monkey prepared to hike up to Ostrich's home. It took five days until they arrived at the spooky, secluded place. A huge cave appeared in the misty clouds. There was only Ostrich living there, in a far-remote place from downtown.

'Hi Ostrich, I'm Panda and here's my friend, Monkey. We are the representatives of Heping village, and we are going to have a Kung Fu battle with humans. We need you to fight against the obnoxious humans. Can you join us?' Panda implored Ostrich.

'I don't want to be in this fight. Although humans are destroying your village, we don't need a battle. Humans are stronger and cleverer than we animals. What if we lose? There is no turning back with humans.' Ostrich explained.

'Ostrich I can empathize with your feelings. But there is no other choice. It's too late to withdraw from the challenge. We need to defend and stand steadfast against their onslaught.'

Monkey suddenly stood up with confidence. 'Old Deer has told me that they have received the humans' letter. Human refused to leave our place, but they initiated a combat competition. There is no time for us to cower. Ostrich, we need you.' Panda begged Ostrich once again. 'Very well, you two can stay here and practice Kung Fu in my hood. I will think about your suggestion. Come on! I will teach you my skills!'

Ostrich welcomed Panda and Monkey.

Scene 4:

Crops and poultry from the farm were made into scrumptious delicacies, rewards that they looked forward to each day for their discipline and hard work. One day, a letter was sent to Ostrich's home.

'Panda, Ostrich, wake up! Old deer sent us a letter!' Monkey screamed in excitement. 'Wait what? Let me read it. Oh no, the battle will be held next Wednesday. We need to fight against 'The BEAT'. It's a kungfu team that will represent humans in the battle. Monkey, I'm sure we are ready for this.' Panda said. '

Guys listen. Your persistence and bravery during the KungFu practice has impressed me. I'm joining this battle!' Ostrich announced seriously.

Both Panda and Monkey exclaimed with their big smile and embraced in tears. ‘That means we need to think of a group name! Let me think.....’ Panda advised. ‘I know! I know! We are the ‘MOOP’! It comes from our names’ first letters,’ Monkey screeched in excitement.

‘Wow! It’s the best that can represent us. We should “moop” together and stand as one. MOOP can do it!’ Ostrich said.

Scene 5

As time went by, the D-day finally arrived. Three representatives of each side met at the Third-finger mountain. Old Deer and Thomas were the judges. They announced the start of the fight. The first one-to-one fight is Panda and an old man called Bill. Bill firstly bounced on Panda’s tremendous body and started tickling him. Since Panda’s fur was too thick, he was resistant to tickling. Panda then swung his body, kicked Bill off the edge of the mountain. Bill was shaking in fear, he didn’t have any energy to stand up and continue the fight. ‘The first point goes to Panda!’

Next, we have Monkey and Ethan in the second round.’ Old deer announced. Monkey spun around Ethan. Ethan used his hands to cover his eyes until Monkey stopped. Instead of making Ethan dizzy, Monkey spun too quickly and that made himself dizzy. Ethan saw Monkey wasn’t concentrating, he grappled Monkey tightly and squeezed. Monkey couldn’t do anything, and he surrendered.

‘Ethan gets a point in the second round! Moving on to the last round.’ Thomas proclaimed.

‘The result depends on me! Keep calm Ostrich, you can do it!’ Ostrich encouraged himself.

Andy started the battle by pushing Ostrich off the cliff. He climbed on Ostrich’s body and grabbed his wings. Ostrich struggled and swung his body side by side to get rid of Andy. They landed on both sides of the edge of the mountain.

Andy’s legs were stuck between the rocks. At this moment, Ostrich ran to him, but Andy dodged. Ostrich tripped over a rock and fell into the hole. They both couldn’t move, and the battle ended. ‘It’s a tie for the final round!’ Thomas announced.

‘No one lost or won in the battle, so all of you should respect each other.’ Old deer said thoughtfully, and everyone agreed.

From now on, human stopped their construction work on animals’ places and animals allowed humans to visit their town. They had a harmonious relationship and HePing village restored peace.

Immortal in the Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Chan, Ching Kiu – 13

Kwok Lok Ching, the Hong Kong mountain-climber extraordinaire, was currently running away from a pack of wild rabid dogs between the Yellow Mountains.

Ching was separated from her teammates in the middle of a competition. She was fed up with her two teammates arguing so much that she wandered off without telling them, and she ended up stranding herself in the middle of nowhere.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps faraway. She blew her whistle to get their attention. However, when the footsteps became louder and clearer, she realised it wasn't just footsteps, but growls and barks! Ching began to run as fast as she could. When she looked back, a pack of dogs were growling at her aggressively, she screeched at the horrifying sight and tried to dash away from them, but she tripped over a thick tree root and fell face first to the ground. One of the dogs sat on her with a thump and barked as others joined. Ching was beyond terrified.

"Are you fine? What's your name?" a deep voice was directed to Ching. Someone came, kneeling in front of Ching.

The poor woman looked up, extremely shocked by the amazing sight in front of her. The man had an otherworldly beauty Ching had never seen before – with long and straight dark brown hair, his gorgeous slightly slanted brown eyes were looking at her, sharp jawline streamed by long side bangs, his light skin tone with a healthy blush lining his cheekbones and slightly upturned nose, and rosy lips like sakura blossom. That man was even prettier than the female models she had seen in runaway shows, but he kept a firm masculine aura by his stance.

"You can call me Ching," Ching snapped out of her stance.

"A foreigner?" The man asked while coaxing the dog off Ching, offering his hand, helping her get up.

"Technically, I'm from Hong Kong," Ching replied, "Mister, why were your dogs chasing me?"

"My name is Tian Jia. My dogs must have heard your movements. This one is called Tofu. I brought the pack out because we were hunting," he explained.

"Do you have something that I can contact my teammates with? I got lost and wandered away from them."

"Come to my place."

Ching followed Tian Jia. They trekked through woods, paths, rivers for hours. Thankfully, they arrived before sunset, and Ching was flabbergasted by the sight in front of her.

"Tian Jia, why are we in front of a palace?"

"Miss, this is my place."

"I was expecting an old cottage or some worn-down house. How did you get people to build you a palace all the way here in the mountains?"

Tian Jia mumbled something and walked in. Ching couldn't hear, so she brushed it off and followed him.

Inside, the rooms she passed by were all luxurious, but one thing was in common – there was nobody. No servants, no palace inhabitants, no nothing.

As she stood silently contemplating, his dog, Tofu pushed her, signalling her to continue walking. However, Tofu pushed too hard that she almost fell but Tian Jia's fast reflexes caught her in his arms just before she fell.

"Oh my! Thank you..." As Ching looked up to her saviour, she saw that Tian Jia was looking at her intensely, she became extremely flustered that her ear turned pink by the intensity of the gaze.

Tian Jia flustered, "You must be very tired. Stay here for a good rest tonight."

They arrived at her bedroom, and Ching opened the door to see the large and airy room, with large windows and a bathroom suite. There were a beautifully carved wooden bed, some chairs, a dainty table and a closet filled with clothes. The room was a mix of modern western style and ancient Chinese style incorporated so flawlessly that even top-tier designers would envy how the two cultures were put together and balanced so well.

"Tian Jia, how did you get people to construct this?" Ching was conflicted between being thankful or to be even more cautious of that unknown man. They hadn't known each other for a day and he helped a lost stranger woman and brought her back to his house, then gave her a luxurious bedroom to stay.

Her suspicion began to crawl out but her thankfulness for that man kept it at bay, for now.

"For now, take a shower. Dinner will be brought to you soon. We will talk in the morning."

"Thank you for doing this Tian Jia!" Ching smiled gratefully to Tian Jia. And unknown to Ching, Tian Jia's heart skipped a beat as Ching smiled at him that brightly.

The next morning, Tian Jia knocked and came into her room with a tray of food.

As Ching finished eating, she asked, "Do you know about the Yellow Mountains Annual Trek? I've given up on the competition, but I should contact my teammates. They must be freaking out now."

"Never heard, but you can stay here for the time being."

After a long silence, Tian Jia decided to speak up, "Ching, I need to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I am an immortal being. I can command the spirits of the wind to do anything for me. The palace was built by them. Your dinner was also brought by them."

"Are you having a fever?" Ching worriedly put her hand on Tian Jia's forehead.

"Ching, I'm telling you this because I don't want to live as an immortal anymore. I watched wars happen, people suffering and historic events nobody alive except me has ever seen. I watched people I loved die in front of me, but I cannot save them and their souls slipped away from me and reaped by Death," Tian Jia sighed, "I was made an immortal because my soulmate from 3000 years ago did not love me. I was a cruel man. The gods punished me by making me immortal until I found my soulmate's reincarnation and made her fall in love with me this time."

"You're telling me this because?" Ching nervously asked, but she could already guess his answer.

"You are my soulmate's reincarnation. I knew it since I laid my eyes on you."

Sighing, Ching got up from her chair, "Can you bring me back to my teammates? You have mistaken me for someone else."

“Ching, please give me a chance. You were the one I didn’t realise I loved until it was too late,” Tian Jia begged, tears threatening to spill in the corners of his eyes.

Heart-breaking to see him begging on his knees, she softened, “You have one month.”

“Thank you, thank you for your chance! If you still do not have the slightest bit of affection for me after one month, I will bring you back to your friends and family.”

“Mom, so did you end up falling for Dad?” a young voice among the other three said.

“Kit, what do you think? If we didn’t fall for each other, you won’t even exist!” Ching sighed, exasperated at her only and youngest son’s question.

“At least your love story is romantic. Dad brought you to places and countries around the world. He gave you everything you wanted. Why wouldn’t you fall for him?” Her second youngest daughter, Wing commented.

“Fall for who?” Tian Jia suddenly opened the bedroom door and poked his head inside, “You mean how your mother fell in love with me? That is definitely because of my handsome good looks!”

“Oh gosh, your ego is going to burst soon if you continue praising yourself. You don’t really have your great looks anymore Dad – your hair is turning white!”

Tian Jia was trembling at the thought of him turning ugly, bald and old. Will his wife not love him anymore?

“Jing, stop teasing your father. And the three of you, go to bed! You’ve passed your bedtime so much already,” Ching chastised her kids as they scurried out of the room, saying their goodnights and getting ready for bed.

“Ching, will you still love me when I turn into a wrinkly grandpa?” Tian Jia was still quite shaken after what his daughter said. After all, he lived through thousands of years without worrying about his appearance.

“Darling, I didn’t only fall for your good looks, you know. You, my love, have so much more underneath those pretty looks of yours.”

“But if it’s not my good looks,” Tian Jia started, “what made you fall for me?”

Ching shrugged, “You love me so dearly that touched my heart and you are kind enough to save a stranger from the woods. You have changed from the cruel man three thousand years ago to the man I love today.”

Tian Jia visibly brightened after Ching’s lovely confession, he kissed her temple softly and hugged her.

Unaware of the curious eyes of their three children watching them, the mortal couple fell asleep, the feeling of bliss and warmth wrapping them like a warm blanket.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Chung, Yan Ling Bethany – 12

An aged woman sat on a bluff, surrounded by the mist—cloaked earth of Huangshan. A tiger lay beside her, its fur a knot of black and ivory. Wisps of clouds swirled just below the tips of the mountain, occasionally bumping into each other and moving on.

The old woman said, "Our time is coming to join our ancestors, Hou. A prodigy will have to be picked, and I will have to teach him the magic of our tribe before it's too late. But who could he be?"

Then there was a sudden shift in the air, and the evening breeze came back tinged with heat. The old woman stood up so abruptly her spine cracked. Pain shot up her back, but she dashed to edge of the bluff nonetheless.

At the edge of the Dividing, the elder and the tiger trembled, watching something that no Hiller has ever seen in a thousand years. The ash was rising.

★

Unsaid words rang in his ears as he crashed through the woods, tears blurring his path like raindrops on a windshield.

He shouldn't have acted out in front of Jin. Shouldn't have wanted to go beyond the Dividing, the layer of clouds that separated Huangshan from the mortal world below. And yet...he did. Anger stopped him like a brick wall. He wouldn't cry about something he wasn't sorry for. He let the wind dry his tears and looked up, realizing he'd arrived at the edge of the same bluff where the last Grounder wildfire had almost consumed the entire Huangshan forest.

According to Jin, he'd been brought up to Huangshan at the time of that exact incident – wait. Jin had never once said that he was brought up on Huangshan. Tam had always thought it was just a slip of the tongue, but what if it wasn't? What if he was a...Grounder?

Before Tam had time to dwell on it, flaming arrows rained down from above.

Had the gods declared war?

★

"What's happening?" Tam gasped as he pushed through the Hillers that had crowded around their elder, Jin, in a cave at the side of Huangshan.

Jin's eyes were dim as she said, "I'm afraid the end has come; Shangdi is angry, the Prophecy is coming true." Her irises crackled with hope as she looked at Tam. "You're our only hope now."

Tam stared wildly at the crowd. "What? Me? But I'm not even sure I'm a Hiller!"

He jumped when Jin put her hand on his arm, her mouth set in a thin line of resolve. "It's true. You are not Hiller, but you are not Grounder either. You are...something else."

Tam's shoulders sagged. "I knew I never belonged."

He pulled away, ran through his flaming village and down Huangshan with his head in a daze. He didn't turn back – not even when his feet touched Grounder earth for the first time. He refused to let the floodgates open, clinging to his determination like a lifeline. *You could run far away...* Jin's voice cut into his conscience, ... *travel across galaxies, and your legacy would still follow.*

Stinging hot tears pushed through like needles, causing him to trip mid-sprint. Tam found himself sprawled on the earth, violent sobs racking his chest as he hit the dirt with his fists. Why did it have to be him? Tam failed to notice the blood, nor the cart hurtling towards him – until it was too late.

Everything went black.

★

He opened his eyes, but they found nothing to adjust to. Then a voice said from behind, "I've been waiting, Tam."

"Who are you?"

"You'd know me as Yan Wang, the god of the dead." He replied.

Bile coated Tam's tongue. "I'm...dead?" A simple 'no' was the reply.

"Why am I here, then?"

"You are here to learn you identity, son of Shangdi."

Tam had to laugh, "My father: Shangdi? The Chinese god of creation?" For a fleeting moment, Tam knew it was the truth. However, he was afraid that if he accepted it, everything he believed about himself would crumble. ...*nothing can define you but you*, Jin was suddenly there, knocking down the walls he had put around him. A flaming symbol of the Chinese dragon ignited above his head: the creature of Shangdi.

Tam exhaled in resignation as the symbol faded. "What do I have to know?"

Yan Wang told him that once ago, Shangdi was full of mercy and kindness, always disguising himself as a mortal and giving to the poor. But not long after he was made king of the gods, his power and wealth blinded him to good conscience. Jin managed to find out from the beggars, and Shangdi, driven by his fear, was determined to destroy Jin's tribe. To stop his wrath, she had to compromise her tribe's magic. But an unexpected arrival stalled him: Tam. His mortal mother gave him to Jin in hopes of greater protection from his father, and seeing this, whatever shred of love he had left kept Shangdi at bay. But the ancient poets knew the inevitable:

*Shangdi's nature will be revealed,
By child's hand be forced to kneel.
An elder's renege will seal their fate,
By Chang'e's moon he'll be too late.
Dragon's blood poured out for all,
Choosing path of love or war?*

“That’s why you need to train, with me.” Yan Wang finished.

★

Chang'e's moon was also known as full moon. Now, on the morning on The Full Moon festival, Tam could hear Yan Wang’s voice in his head, guiding him. Tam envisioned his feelings of stress and anger as balloons and letting go of all the strings at once, and when he opened his eyes, he was encased in a hologram of a dragon. Tam spread his wings and took flight, leaving the underworld behind.

Back on Huangshan, all of the Chinese gods had dominated more than half of the mountain, and the Hillers were backed onto the edge of a cliff, cowering in fear. Flaming arrows littered the ground like fireflies.

Jin was horrified when she saw him, “No, Tam, leave! Now!”

“My son.” A voice interrupted. “Glad you could join us.”

“What do you want?” Tam spat, facing his father.

Shangdi smiled thinly. “Simple: your magic.” He turned to Jin. “That was the deal after all, wasn’t it?” The Hillers murmured, disbelieve plain on their faces.

Jin proclaimed sadly, “I'm afraid Shangdi is right; it’s my fault. But please, take only my life, in place of the magic of my people.”

★

Shangdi roared with laughter at her plea as silence settled upon the Hillers. A young girl scrambled to her feet and squeaked, “Anyone would’ve done what Jin did. And even if it’s her fault, I will fight for our home.” Jin’s face was a canvas of pride and shame.

Scattered applause from the Hillers turned into an uproar as they cheered, “For Huangshan!”

Tam took flight as the Hillers summoned their magic and attacked. He breathed fire down on the gods and cleared the path for his family, with Yan Wang riding piggyback as the god fought alongside him. But they were still no match against the army of gods.

Tam was suddenly thrown against a boulder, blood gushing out from his nose among impact. He watched as his blood penetrated the hologram and seeped into the earth. "You thought you could defeat me?" Shangdi roared and the gods shifted their feet uneasily. He spread his hands and tendrils of magic snaked out from the Hillers' mouths and into his. All seemed lost, until Tam remembered the last line of the prophecy. The sudden boost of clarification freed Tam from the god's magic as he realized what the words meant: with Shangdi vulnerable and the gods momentarily without a leader, Tam now had the power to choose between war or peace.

Tam's voice was loud and clear as he shouted, "I choose love!" The gods didn't need any more incentive: they all charged Shangdi. The king of the gods was past the point of no return.

With the last of his strength, Tam kicked Shangdi's legs out from under him as the gods held him down. Tam's dragon hologram flickered and disappeared as he took one last regretful look at his father. "I banish you, Shangdi, to exile."

Shangdi's scream filled the air as his body turned to ash. "The mighty king has fallen." Yan Wang murmured as he and all the other gods started to fade away too. "Shangdi is our foundation. As he goes, so do we. The universe won't cease to operate, but we will be gone...for good, perhaps." Yan Wang's words floated away, bittersweet like his ashes.

Jin was hurt badly in battle, and looking at her still body, Tam's heart hurt more than his wound. Yet he knew Jin would've wanted him to fight.

Tam looked up. The ash was rising.

Foreset of the Mind

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Hanson, Anjalika – 13

As I woke up, I couldn't help but feel hungover and dead.

Slowly I opened my eyes, only to find myself in the middle of nowhere. Lost and alone. I tried to get up. I started to feel extremely dizzy. Colours soon appeared everywhere. I was in a familiar place.

I was in a place I once used to live in with my husband.

We chose to live in the tall mountains of China because my husband felt very connected to it as he was very intrigued by Chinese History..

I started to look around. I was surrounded by trees. The sky was blood red. I started to cry in confusion and fear.

“Am I asleep? Am I losing my mind?” I thought to myself.

I felt alone. Not knowing what was going on.

As I continued to cry, a neutering voice could be heard not so far away, singing. It was the voice of a man. Very deep and calming. I could hear music. It echoed. It sounded like my deceased husband.

My husband went missing a year ago. No one knows where he is and I haven't been able to process what has happened. Not knowing what has happened to him scares and hurts me the most.

I felt a sudden urge to follow the voice. Maybe this is where he's been all this time.

It was so alluring. I could hear the sound of loud doors creaking throughout the blowing air. I still didn't know where I was or where I was supposed to be. All I knew was that I wanted to follow this voice.

As I got up and started walking. I could hear the sound of loud birds flying in the sky. It was the same bird my husband and I would hear every morning while waking up in our old house. It felt so magical yet scary at the same time...sort of like a nightmare..

The further I walked into the forest, the louder the voice became. I was crying. I was finally going to see, hold and feel him again.

I walked faster and faster. I suddenly could see a similar building not too far away peaking through the unrealistically large trees.

I think this is our old house.

“Is this where the voice is coming from?” I thought to myself.

The wind blew so heavily that as I walked closer and closer, I kept stumbling to the ground.

After walking that felt like forever...

I finally made it, I was now in front of our old house that was now very dark in colour. The voice was louder than ever. It echoed so much through the sky. I needed to get inside and see him again. I entered and opened the door. A gust of wind followed.

I climbed up the large staircases, as the voice got louder and louder and felt closer and closer.

As I walked in, I saw that everything was broken and had huge holes throughout every wall. I was high on the ground and the blood red sky looked redder than ever.

I was starting to get scared, but as I walked more, his voice only got louder which made me feel...safe.

After walking through each and every hallway, I was now in front of a dramatically large door that was twice my size.

"This must be where the voice is coming from. This is where he is!" I thought to myself.

I immediately tried to open the door, and it was a struggle. I stumbled to the ground after succeeding. I was excited and wanted to see him again. So badly.

I got up from the ground that I had stumbled on.

As I looked up I saw blood, splashed all over the walls and windows that filled the entire room.

It was our bathroom.

I screamed. I turned around and tried to leave the room before the door shut closed aggressively.

Blood marks were all over the door reading, "You can't escape what you've created."

The voice was still playing only for me to start listening to what it was actually saying.

"What was I supposed to do back then?"

"I reach my hand to cover my mouth.."

"Have I lost myself or have I gained you?"

I started to remember. I started to remember what happened and what I did. My personality disorder...whenever I would dissociate to my alt, it would be nothing but filled with anger from its past traumas and would physically take it all out on my husband.

This time I must've taken it too far and ran away from home...

"Please... please tell me this is a nightmare."

I looked over at the bathtub. I saw his body...followed by the reflection of me drowning him to his death.

I fell to the ground and broke apart. I did this? I am such a monster!

He never told the police. He just couldn't. He knew that I didn't mean any of this and couldn't help the fact that my disorder caused me to do this to him. He would take the pain my disorder would put on him while still unconditionally loving me to pieces.

I looked over at the bathtub again, and this time fell into it and drowned myself.

I didn't deserve to live anymore after doing this to the only person who loved me and would sacrificed his life for me.

The Mystery of the Misty Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Ku, Tin Yan Siana – 12

The Mountains of the Yellow Emperor, also known as the Misty Mountains, stood tall in eastern China: the home of famous poets. Rumours about these mountains still went around from one person to another. Stories were inspired by them, mystical tales and unreal creatures. People made up things about the mountain that made no sense. Tiny houses perched on top of the mountains. Still, no one knew what truly lies in the mountains that people admired. Even with all kinds of rumours, people were certain that one particular tale was true.

One night, a shadow crept up the mountains. A young female, no older than eighteen. Only a backpack hung from her shoulders. Step by step, she walked up the ancient steps. The mountains were breathtakingly beautiful underneath the light of the sun, but they seemed completely different as the moonlight shone on them. It was empty, yet the unsettling feeling of someone watching her never seemed to leave the girl. The moon was the only thing providing light for the girl to see. A gust of wind blew, tangling her black locks.

The feelings of regret and fear washed over her. She turned around to leave, only to find a thick fog blocking her way, trapping her in the mountains. Without a choice, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and spun around, only to come face to face with an unearthly creature.

She screamed and stumbled backwards. The creature was like nothing she had ever seen. It had blood-red eyes and white pupils. It had no nose and no mouth. Its hair looked exactly like tentacles. It had the body of a human, its bones piercing through its skin and legs like a goat's. It crept towards her at a slow pace. The girl shrieked once again and ran down a never-ending path. Trees surrounded her and blocked the light. Soon, a house appeared in front of her. She smiled with delight and bolted for the back door, entering the house through it and slamming it shut.

She sighed with relief, but couldn't help but feel uneasy. Something was underneath her feet. Kneeling down, her hands touched the hard, wooden floor and felt a wet substance on it. Groaning with disgust, she stood up and heard the light switch on behind her. Adjusting to the light, she peered at the sight in front of her in horror.

Her foot was stepping on a bloody sword. Unconscious people were tied up in chairs in front of her. She picked up a satchel near her and rummaged through it. In it were pieces of parchment spattered with ink, poems describing the view from above the mountains. She looked at the ink-stained fingers of the people tied to the chairs. She immediately understood that these people were poets. She gagged at the sight of blood on the floor. Suddenly, footsteps echoed through the hallway leading to the room. Panicking, the girl hid behind a cupboard next to the unconscious poets. Just as she crouched down, she saw a shadow.

Surprisingly, there was no one there, only a shadow on the ground. She still heard footsteps and the sounds of someone breathing heavily. A choked sob escaped her. Burying her head in her knees, she knew she was doomed. Footsteps approached her and she felt a warm breath on her toes. She stayed as still as possible, stuffing the fabric of her sleeve into her mouth to muffle the sounds of her sobs.

After a few seconds, she saw a translucent hand grip her ankle hard and drag her from behind the cupboard. She shrieked and cried hysterically, begging the hand to let her go. She thrashed and tried to pull her foot out of the creature's grasp, but to no avail. Her cheek dragged against the floor, the ragged edges of wood piercing her soft skin. The creature finally stopped dragging her and sat her up. It clamped a piece of cloth over her nose and mouth, suffocating her until she fell unconscious.

The girl woke up in a dark chamber. After her eyes adjusted to the dark, she tried to stand up, but instantly fell to her knees due to a sharp pain in her leg. Blood trickled from her leg, spilling out of five marks which belonged to the hand's fingernails, to the ground. A putrid smell filled her nose as she gagged. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. Her hands were tied together with a piece of rope and a mask was clamped onto her face.

Using all of her strength, she crawled to a window and peeked out. Nothing had changed. It was the same view she had seen when she had first entered these mountains. The same houses. The same trees. The same path that she walked. It felt different to her though. A dark aura surrounded the houses. The trees looked more like spikes than plants. The path looked like a stairway leading to her death.

Ignoring the pain in her leg, she stood up and looked around frantically for an exit. She wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. She felt around the room using her back and eventually found a door. Opening it, she smiled with relief as it led to the stone path she used to enter here, but that smile disappeared as she saw dozens of demon-like creatures, searching their surroundings for their next meal.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed down the hallway leading to the room. Were these the steps belonging to that translucent hand? It seemed likely. She started to lose control. It was a dilemma. Either she got dragged back into a dark room with no exit, or she risked getting devoured by hungry creatures. Tears welled in her eyes. She was never getting out of here. Who knew that these mountains, which looked like a paradise in the morning sun, could hold such terrors?

“Hey! You!” Her blood froze as she heard the voice. She arched her neck towards her right and saw a boy. Blood was stained on his clothing and he had a scar on his cheek. His hazel eyes stared right at her as he motioned for her to follow him. Without thinking twice, she bolted towards the boy and thrust her bound hands in front of his face. He nodded and helped her untie the ropes before ripping off the mask on her face. She took in a deep breath and let out a happy sigh.

The boy told her that he had also been trapped in the mountains and was trying to find a way out. He said he had found a small house which was empty and full of supplies and food, saying that the two of them could stay there for that night and leave the next day. The girl’s eyes were shining as she heard him say these things. She took his hand and they ran deeper into the thick fog. Neither of the two kids were ever seen again.

Some people say that they decided to live in the mountains, obligated to slay all the creatures in the mountains and save the trapped poets. Others say that the boy is in league with the shadow in the mountain and led her into a trap, causing her to suffer an undesirable death. The rumours about the mountains still go around in China, as people tell each other tales about these mountains. But to this day, what really happened, no one really knows.

Finding my identity

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Leung, Ka Wing – 13

Hi, I am Ashley, I am 11 years old. My mom and dad had a divorce three years ago and I had been in my mom's ward since then. My mom had never let me leave the house after the divorce not even for school, so I had no friends except Claudia. I met her when I was in kindergarten and we had been friends since then. I would always wonder: why did my parents get divorced and what was my dad doing now? But since I had never seen my dad since the divorce. I didn't know the answer. I would always ask my mother, when can I leave the house and explore the world and her answer was always the same,

"The world is too dangerous for you."

I was so tired of hearing the same answer every time I asked. Until yesterday, I received a package from my father. Inside the package was a wrapped present and there was a note inside the bag, it wrote,

"You could open the present tomorrow but don't touch the picture until you think you are ready. And also, don't tell your mother about this."

He drew a winking emoji and I was filled with excitement but feeling quite unsure.

I woke up early in the morning, feeling excited as ever to open the present, so I ripped off the present's wrapping paper. Inside the package, there was a book in it. Out of curiosity, I opened the book, there was a line that said, "Everything you want to know is inside." written by my father himself and above it was a drawing of a huge mountain surrounded by fog. It was so realistic that I couldn't resist myself from touching the picture. Suddenly, a yellow portal appeared and I jumped because I was shocked. I thought: that wasn't supposed to happen.

After this happened, I called my friend, Claudia and she said she was going to come and check it out. After a few minutes, the doorbell rang. Claudia was at the door. We went up to my bedroom where the book was hidden. I let Claudia look at the picture and she was really amazed by how real the picture looked and then we decided to search where this picture was from.

After a while of searching, we found out this mountain was in China, and it was called Huangshan. When we said the name Huangshan, the book glowed again and this time there was a loud humming sound that sounded like a bee. My mum heard it and she loudly called out my name.

"Ashley! What is that noise coming from your ..."

Before she could even finish her sentence, Claudia and I were pulled into the book and we could hear the book closing itself. After a few seconds, we fell on rough ground. We stood up and looked around since there was a lot of fog, we couldn't see where we were going, so I asked, "Where are we?"

Suddenly I could feel that I was about to fall off a cliff but luckily somebody held my hand and pulled me. When I wanted to thank him, he gestured to me to turn around and my jaws dropped. In front were some huge mountains with sharp peaks and when the sun shined on them, the rocks became golden.

Claudia exclaimed, "There are no words to describe the scenery. It's just breathtaking."

After enjoying the amazing scenery, we turned around to see who just saved my life.

Claudia whispered, "It was Li Bai, the famous poet who just saved your life."

He heard what Claudia said and told us to come with him. Since he was speaking Chinese, I did not really understand said but when I saw Claudia following him, I knew what he meant.

We kept on walking until we saw a house. After we went in, Li Bai made some tea for us. While we were drinking the tea, we introduced ourselves and after he heard my name, he looked at me as if I were worrying him. Then he told us to sit since he got some important things to tell us but because I didn't understand Chinese, he was mainly talking to Claudia while I was wandering around his. But then, I heard him mention my name. When I turned my head, I saw him staring at me with concern in his eyes. What he said seemed to have surprised Claudia.

I looked at Claudia with confusion, "Claude, what did he just say?"

Claudia answered, "He said to solve the mystery, we must meet the King of Huangshan. There is a hole in this mountain that leads to his kingdom but since there is a group who has rebelled against the King, they would attack anyone who dares to cross the way to visit the King so we must be careful."

The next morning, we set off to the hole. It was dark and damp inside and we could barely see anything. Suddenly, Claudia grabbed my arm and muttered,

“Did you hear that?”

I looked up from where the sound came from and my jaw dropped. I pointed at the thing I saw and stuttered, “A be...beast.”

As I retrieved from shock, I felt my hand being pulled and heard my friend yell,

“Run!”

The beast looked down at us and growled.

We sprinted hoping to lose him but just to find ourselves running straight to the beast.

The beast saw the chance and pranced toward us. He had his big furry paws on my chest. He used his claw to look at the necklace I was wearing and said slyly,

“What is a princess like you doing in the cave? Are you just lost or are you the ‘heirress’ that the King has always been talking about?”

All of a sudden, a wolf jumped out from behind and sunk its teeth into the beast’s skin and the beast cried painfully and scowled at the wolf,

“Mind your own business, what are you even doing here? If you are about to steal the princess for the King, then, not on my watch.”

The wolf launched his claws at the wolf but the wolf ducked and that was when they started fighting aggressively, scratching and biting each other but in the end, the wolf won and the beast escaped.

The wolf looked at us and said, “Follow me, I am going to bring you to the palace. The King wants to see you.”

On the way to the palace, the situation had been bothering me: What do I have to do with the King? What did the beast mean?

Not long later, we arrived at a village and there was a palace on the hill, so the wolf led us to the palace. As soon as we entered the palace, the first thing I noticed was a portrait – the man inside was strangely familiar. We went to the King’s room and that’s when everything started making sense – the father that I had not seen for years was sitting right there on the throne.

My father patted the wolf next to him, “You did a good job.” Then, he walked towards me, “Come with me, I need to show you something.”

We went to the balcony in his bedroom and looked at the sunset.

I whispered very softly almost unable to hear, “Why did you leave us?”

My dad looked at me with guilt in his eyes and said, “To protect this country. It’s a risk I had to take. One day, you will be the queen of this entire country. I know you don’t understand right now, but they are your people. They came here to hide from war, but enemies have been staring at this throne for a long time, waiting for the perfect time to strike and destroy the country. To prevent this from happening, I have to find a talented successor to protect this throne, and this is you.”

I asked, “So I have to stay here to have school?”

My father nodded.

Unsure of my choices, I left the room and a guard showed me to my room.

Later that night, I heard a soft knock on my door and my dad came in.

“Mum has agreed to let you stay here, you feel fine with that?” he asked.

I nodded.

The next morning, Claudia left by using a portal. Although I didn’t want her to leave, I knew it was the right thing. I started attending school there.

That was how I found out I was a princess.

Utopia

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Li, Ming Yan -13

Am I dead?

This was the first thing that came to my mind when I woke up. I should have been dead.

I sat up slowly. I could still feel the pain spreading all over my body from head to toe. It seemed that I had been asleep for quite a while.

Wait—

I was still in my clothes, a cerulean blue sweater and black jeans. I pulled them up in panic. There were no bruises on my arms, elbows or knees. I was unhurt. Even my clothes were intact.

How strange.

Then I looked around. I found myself on a bed with white silk blankets, in a quaintly decorated house. This was not the kind of heaven I was expecting. I expected to be in a white, limitless space, and angels would be singing around me. Yet all I could hear was the birds chirping outside the house. I could even feel and listen to my heartbeats and my every breath.

So I have not died. Where am I, then?

I got down the bed. I was blinded by dizziness for a moment, but I managed to stagger towards the door. The wooden floor squeaked – it was probably an old house.

A blast of cold air rushed in as I pushed the door open.

Endless rows of peach blossom trees came into my view. The snow had blanketed the ground and ornamented the stems and twigs while the heavy fog blurred the whole dreamy scene.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?”

I turned around. A tall woman in a grey cloak was standing behind me. Her complexion was bizarrely wan, but her skin was as smooth as a baby’s.

“Who are you?”

“I saved you,” she said with a slight Chinese accent.

“You’re avoiding the question.”

She chuckled, “So you don’t want to know how you got here, or where you are. Instead, you want to know who I am?”

“I’m just trying to figure something out. How did you save me? I fell off the cliff.”

“How? I found you here, on the pinnacle of the mountain.”

I sighed and began to tell her everything.

I went to the Yellow Mountains with my family at dawn. We sat near the cliff, to watch the sun climb up from the east towards the middle of the sky bit by bit. It was a breathtaking scene. We were all enjoying that moment of joy and serenity.

“Come here, Phillipa.” A voice coming from afar distracted me.

Did I just hear someone calling my name?

“Come!”

No, this must be my hallucination, I thought.

“Come catch me!”

This time I could no longer ignore it. The sound came from the edge of the cliff. I got up and walked towards it. I could see a golden ball of light floating in the air.

“Phillipa, come and have some sandwiches.”

“Just a second, Mum.”

I could see it clearer and clearer as I moved forward. It was dazzling.

“Where are you going, Phillipa?” Dad exclaimed.

It started dancing and squealing. I grinned and reached out my hand carefully.

"I just want to take a look at this."

"What are you doing—come back! It's dangerous!"

Ignoring the warning, I tried to catch the golden ball. Then, my body started to spin, everything obscure and I lost consciousness.

"A golden ball? Seems like Xiao Gin got bored and experimented a new mischief on you. Sorry about that. I shall educate Xiao Gin later," the woman frowned.

"What? That golden ball was real and has a name? I thought I lost my mind and fell off the cliff." I got even more confused.

"No, you didn't. Xiao Gin brought you here. I found you somewhere in the woods. You probably fainted since your body couldn't adapt to the weather here."

"This doesn't make sense at all! Where are we, and who are you?" I cried. This is ridiculous!

"Calm down, child. I'm Fantine, and this is Taohuayuan, the Peach Blossom Land."

"Taohuayuan? I read about it. Isn't it fictional?"

"No," she looked displeased, "the man in the story you read about did exist and came here, but our ancestors modified his memory when they found out that he wanted to tell everyone about it. That's why no one could find us," she said.

"So Taohuayuan is real, and this is it?"

"Yes. I'll show you around."

I followed her as she walked towards the peach blossom woods.

When we entered the woods, my jaw dropped. I was astonished by what I saw inside the woods. There were gold and silver flowers that were talking to each other, and monkeys, squirrels that were dancing...Everything was just surreal.

"This is—"

"A magical place," she cut in when I was still finding the right word to describe all these.

"Ah!" Suddenly, I was lifted up in the air by an unknown force.

"Xiao Gin, stop your nonsense right now. You almost killed her!"

"Ouch!" The next moment, I fell onto the ground. There was a bright golden ball of light floating in the air!

"Xiao Gin," Fantine pointed at it angrily, "I'm very disappointed with you!"

The golden ball of light turned blue and started squalling.

I got up and flicked the ashes on my clothes away. "What exactly is this?" I muttered.

"It is my pet," said Fantine, "it is surely older than me, but still acts like a child. No one knows where it came from, but we have got used to it." She bent down and petted Xiao Gin gently.

Every word coming out from Fantine's mouth perplexed me. She seemed to be amused by my dubious look and said, "I'll bring you to someone. He'll be able to answer everything you want to know."

The village was at the end of the woods. There were dozens of cottages, all wooden and antiquated, just like the ones I saw in historical Chinese television shows. There were cattle and dogs, farmland and ponds. The villagers seemed to be busy, but all of them looked joyful. Fantine greeted some of them and led me into one of the cottages that looked particularly old and shabby.

There weren't many decorations in the house. An old man who had greyish-white hair and wrinkles all over his face, was sitting in an armchair, humming with his eyes closed.

"Grandpa."

He opened his eyes, looking surprised seeing me, "Fang—ding?"

"My Chinese name," Fantine said to me.

I nodded.

"I brought an outsider."

"Good! Come closer, child, let me look at you!"

I walked towards him.

He sized me up and said, "Interesting. How did you get here?"

"It's Xiao Gin."

"Well, apparently it likes you. What's your name?" He smiled, and all his wrinkles rose.

"Phillipa. I don't understand, sir. The creatures, the plants...Nothing here seems to make sense."

"You can call me Tang Lao Bo. The peach blossom trees my great-great-great-grandfather built seem to have some kind of magic-extraordinary plants and creatures were born. Our people gain power from the trees too. Some live very long and some have supernatural powers."

"Do you want some tea, Phillipa?" Fantine walked out of the kitchen.

"I'd love to. Thank you."

Tang Lao Bo took a sip of the tea and continued, "To hide from wars, our ancestors found this place and settled down thousands of years ago. They planted trees and built houses. We never went outside since then."

"But why didn't you go outside when the wars ended?"

He shook his head and said in a hoarse voice, "We have no desire to do that. Isn't it amazing to live here? Up here, beyond the clouds, below the sun."

"How about you? How is it to be living outside?" Fantine handed me a cup of tea and asked.

"It is not as peaceful as it is here. Frankly, it is such a mess. Thousands of people die every day, justice is never present...I guess you're right. This is the best place in the world."

"Phillipa," Fantine patted my shoulder and uttered, "this place might be a magical, fantastical utopia... But the perfect place is always where our family is."

"You're right, Fantine." I started to miss my family. Are they worried about me?

"Would you like another cup of tea?" Tao Lao Bo asked.

"No, thanks. I think it's time for me to go home now."

"If you wish," Fantine smiled.

"Will my memory be erased afterwards?"

"We'll let Xiao Gin decide," Fantine whistled and Xiao Gin appeared out of nowhere.

"Touch it when you're ready."

Once again, I fainted.

"Phillipa!"

I opened my eyes. I was still standing on the edge of the cliff. Hours had passed for me, but not a second seemed to have passed here. I rushed back to my family and hugged them tightly. Yes, this is where I belong. I looked up and found that Xiao Gin was still floating in the air, among the clouds.

"Goodbye."

It blinked, and slowly faded away.

The Mystical Mountain

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Ngai, Hannah Hailey – 12

Molly and her mum were on a trip in the eastern side of China. They decided to go there because it was a summer holiday

It's now 9a.m in the morning and they had just arrived their destination.

Huangshan was beautiful and stunning. There were many mountains, more than you could ever imagine. There were tall ones and short ones.

Molly and her mum were climbing the steep and tall mountains with a tourist as their guidance. But suddenly, the sky grew darker and darker. And a few minutes later, the blue skies became gloomy and were filled with grey clouds. Molly heard thunder in the dark, jet black sky. "boom! Boom! Boom!" it stroked thrice. Then rain started pouring. It rained terribly heavy that day.

Since all three of them didn't have any umbrellas. They had to run through the heavy rain without a cover on their heads.

They ran and ran and ran. Until Molly slipped on a wet leaf. She fell down onto the edge of the sidewalk. And rolled down the mountain.....

She fell down a small slope, but luckily she wasn't hurt too bad, but the problem was, she was in a totally different place.

She looked around, and didn't see her mum. She yelled," mum? Hello?" but no one replied.

Molly fainted for a while, but when she woke up, she found herself sleeping on fresh green grass. And there were also a bunch of people staring at her.

Molly was confused, but after hearing those people explain, it all made sense.

The villagers found her fainted right outside the door of their village, so they took her in for care. The villagers were super nice, they brought Molly to have a tour through the village.

The whole time when Molly stayed in this mysterious place, she didn't dare step into the temple. She didn't even dare walking one step close to it.

Many villagers had told Molly many times that that there was a myth that who evr lives in that temple will cast a deep curse on whoever trespasses.

But that was the only thing that was keeping Molly from going home, so she took out all her bravery, then walked to the temple's front door.

Molly knocked on the door, but no one replied, so she just walked straight in. the first floor was just like a normal house, a living room, kitchen... I think you'd know.

She hesitated if she should keep going up. As she heard some weird sounds coming from upstairs.

Then, Molly heard someone walking up the stairs, she was too scared to move...

"Ahhhhh !" Molly screamed in fright, as she felt the creature touch her legs. "Please don't bite or eat me ! Please..." Molly was about to cry. But she didn't, because she heard a, "meow!" behind her. She turned around slowly.

"it's a cat!" Molly exclaimed, "Awww, it's so cute! You almost scared me to death haha."

It purred in joy, Then Molly decided to give it a name, " Hmm, your name will be.. brave!"

Molly opened every single door but they were all just ordinary rooms.

But when Molly finally reached the end of the corridor, there was a green emerald door. The door looked like it had been there for many years. It was old and had roots and leaves covering it, like the main entrance of this little mysterious village.

But this one was different. This door was locked. Molly could see many locks and chains on the door, too.

Molly searched every where she could, and finally found the key hidden in the walls.

Molly successfully unlocked the dor, but all she saw was a small tree sitting on a wooden table.

" turns out there's nothing special here."

As she sighed , she said " I wish I had a comfy bed to sleep in now, I'm exhausted!"

Then "poof!" a nice-looking bed suddenly appeared next to Molly. Molly got confused, she rubbed her eyes to make sure that this was a dream. But it wasn't. Molly had so many questions. Then, she remembered that she said the words " I wish"

Molly released her fingers on her palm and saw the violet leaf again. "Wait... could it be?"

To test if the leaf was magical, Molly wished, "I wish, that Brave would be clean!" Again, there was a "poof!" sound, and Brave's fur was spotless. Molly shouted, "Whoa! This is incredible! "

Then, she made a bunch of more wishes, until she had used up all the leaves...

Actually, Molly still had one more wish left in her pocket, a leaf flew in when she didn't notice. So, she had no idea.

After that, she started to drift off to sleep

Suddenly, a skinny tall pale woman burst into the room and scared Molly half to death. She had just finished making her wishes and just started sleeping.

“wait. What? who are you? And What are you doing in my room?”

“Excuse me, YOUR room? You’re not even in your own house young lady! You’re coming with me! Trespassing, going into people’s houses without permission, even touching our personal stuff, who do you think you are!”

Molly was too scared to react, then she was pulled out of that room, into another room.

A second later, she was being kidnaped into a room even darker and smaller than the one just now.

About ten minutes later, the woman came back .

The woman announced, “ You will be staying here until you’ve served us enough.”

Molly yelled, “What!? How can you do this!? I have a home and I am only 12 years old!”

The woman didn’t care, she just slammed the door shut.

Molly started to cry.

After dinner, which was just bread and milk, Molly tried hard to fall asleep but failed as there was just so much things going on. She missed her family. Molly also missed freedom, but for now, she’ll just have to do what she doesn’t do best: Obey and wait.

The next day, the mistress of the house came in first thing at the morning, at six o’clock to wake Molly up and tell her to do her chores

Molly got up and sat straight and listened to whatever the mistress had to say to her. Then the mistress made a bunch of orders. But Molly only knew one thing from listening, This woman, ms foster, was a mean, cold blooded person.

Molly worked so hard every single day. And every night when she lied on her bed, she would cry on her pillow and couldn’t fall asleep.

Time flies, and two months had already passed. But Molly was still stuck in the temple.

One day, Molly decided to wash her jacket.

As Molly took off her jacket, something dropped out. It was one of the magical leaves! Molly was overjoyed.

“hooray!” Molly screamed in joy. tears fell on Molly’s cheeks. She felt instantly grateful.

Molly whispered into her hands slowly and carefully, “I wish that I were beside my mum right now.”

“Poof!”

Molly suddenly felt her head spinning round and round. And a second later, she was standing right next to her mum. But what surprised her is, her mum was still hiking on Huangshan!

When Molly’s mum saw her, she yelled, “Molly! Are you trying to scare me? You’ve been gone for five whole minutes! Where did you go? And are you okay after falling down the slope?”

“Um...Yeah, yeah I’m fine, but... There was this magical village with a mean mistress who locked me up and.. Wait, five minutes?”

“Molly, dear you must be still hurt by the accident.. I’ll bring you to the doctor right after we get back to the hotel.”

Once Molly and her mum were on the taxi, Molly thought, “Could it be all just a dream?” Just then, Molly’s palm fell loose and out dropped a blue leaf.

“ The leaf! So it was true after all !” Molly exclaimed.

She clenched her fists , and thought that one day she could prove that it’s all real.

But then Molly thought : “Should I really let the world know about this place? What would happen to the villagers there...” There were so many questions, but Molly the best thing to do was...Molly took a deep breath, and made her decision.

Molly took a last, long look at those beautiful, tall, magical mountains. “ I guess the quote which my mum always tells me about ,the most beautiful things are always hidden and always should be is true, its just the best way to keep things safe.”

Molly then smiled at the flower, and held it tight. She didn’t want to waste it. And, Molly also learnt that she didn’t need anything that wasn’t necessary and also didn’t be so stubborn anymore.

China's Magical Mountains

St. Stephen's Girls' College, Yuen, Cheuk Ying Lea – 12

Hi everyone, I am John, a photographer that specializes in taking photos of beautiful scenery. I have been taking photos of the famous HuangShan lately, and its beauty completely blew me away. It just looks so magical and unearthly, I don't think words could describe it. You mean you haven't heard of this outstanding mountain? Well, the mountains are breathtakingly beautiful, as I have already told you, with their sharp peaks, raised villages and floating clouds. Some of the pine trees may even be 1500 years old! The tens of thousands of stone steps that lead up to the peak may be just as ancient. A pair of famous Chinese poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, lived on the mountains in the 8th century, and this is why I chose to take photos of HuangShan: to learn more about where the poets have lived before. However, I haven't been able to go to the top yet, as the road to the peak is not clear, and it is very dangerous. However, I am hoping to, one day, be able to reach the peak of HuangShan.

Hello humans in the future, I am Hestia, the goddess of Nature. What? You haven't learned about me, one of the most respected goddesses ever? Then I guess I have to introduce myself. As I mentioned, I am Hestia, the goddess of Nature. I make all the things in Nature, including mountains, animals and plants. Now you know a bit about me, let me tell you about the time I made HuangShan.

One day, I got called into Zeus' office (he is the leader of all the gods and goddesses). "Hestia, I heard from Akmon (the god of air and winds; he is also my teacher and taught me everything I know) that you are failing to reach the standards that a goddess should, so I have prepared a task for you. If you fail, you will not be able to keep your place as a goddess. "Please... please Mr Zeus, please give me a chance.... What ... what is the task I have to complete?" "You must make a mountain that will take my breath away. Please take note that I have really high standards." Then, he ordered his men to usher me out. So that is why I made HuangShan like no mountain before. After a series of sleepless nights, I finally finished creating the most beautiful mountain ever -- HuangShan. Zeus was very impressed by my work, and let me continue to be the goddess of Nature.

Be careful, everyone, this is very valuable and we can't afford to break it.... Oh, sorry, didn't see you there. I am Flynn, the chief of Azmar -- the village on HuangShan. We are elves, and Hestia ordered us to keep HuangShan clean and peaceful. I was in awe when she first showed me the mountain: it was beautiful, so much so that I was rooted to the ground, not able to take my gaze away from the masterpiece in front of me that would be my home very soon. The amazing goddess even built me a village, and named it Azmar. The village was just as breathtaking as the mountain it was built on, with lots of beautiful architecture and landscaping and plenty of facilities. She offered me the position of chief of the village, and I couldn't refuse. She assured me that she would be watching us from above, and if there was any danger she would help us. That is how I became the chief of Azmar, and other elves moved in one by one. Also, Hestia had made many cute magical creatures to keep me and my fellow villagers company, such as griffins, celeritates (a speedy fox that leaves a trail of fire), dragons, and, well, you name it! So these are the creatures that live with us in HuangShan. Oh, I found a letter from the famous poets Li Bai and Du Fu, but I don't understand their language. I think you will know what they are writing, so let me give it to you.

(Translated into English): Greetings, whoever is reading this letter, I am Li Bai. Du Fu and I have discovered a place that is very beautiful and inspiring -- HuangShan. We decided to visit this gorgeous place to get more inspiration for poems. After days of travelling, we reached the famous HuangShan. It was even more beautiful than we could have ever imagined, with its sharp peaks and floating clouds, giving it a mysterious appearance, it was the perfect inspiration. We started our journey up the mountains, seeing many new creatures along the way -- creatures that we

had never seen. The creatures also inspired us to write poems, the best we have ever written. When we finally reached the peak, the chief of the village, Flynn, greeted us warmly. He was very nice to us, and introduced us to the other villagers living in Azmar (the village's name). The village was as stunning as HuangShan itself, with its modern buildings and facilities. Flynn let us rent a room to stay in, and we began our time in the mountains.

We got used to village life quickly, with cute creatures keeping us company. The villagers were also very friendly towards us, giving us ideas and opinions on how we could make our poems better (they actually had some very good ideas). Du Fu also got along well with the villagers, laughing and chatting with them every moment he got. The villagers are very hardworking, they work hard every day and do their best at every task they are given. We have a lot to learn from them. Also, they are very easy to get along with. Those were the best days of my life. Sadly, we had to leave after a month of living there, as it was time to return home. Dear reader, I hope this letter gives you insight into how the villagers treat people and what it was like to live in the HuangShan mountains.

Hello, I am Ashlyn, a writer. I am planning on writing a book about HuangShan. After reading these accounts of the mountains, I think that HuangShan is very unique. It is a magical place and not everyone can reach the top, due to its winding and obstacle-filled roads. It is a supernatural place (no wonder the *Lord of the Rings* is based on the misty mountains of HuangShan), and a very good subject to write stories about. I hope you like HuangShan and maybe go see it in person one day.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Alonzi, Eva – 12

Once upon a time there was a perfect world with no suffering, but one day in the northern part of China a pair of escaping slaves a woman and a man past by some magical mountains hoping that their lives may of changed like an urban legend spoken hundreds of years ago.

“Since we are in 2020, we have experience lots for example COVID–19 has happened in 2009 and almost 75% of the worlds population has passed away. In the world there are only about 20,000 people in the world.”

“Ya but that’s not our focus right now! We have to figure out a way to make the legend come true...”

Said the female slave.

“Look, look! “
He said with excitement.

“I found the scroll!”

“What does it say? “

“It says that if we don’t complete the tasks that have been given, our lives might change in the worst way possible...”
He said.

“Well what does that mean?”

“Oh it means we have to complete some tasks and if we don’t it going to be a problem.”

“OMG I KNOW BUT LIKE CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT TASKS WE NEED TO DO!?”

“OH! Sorry I thought you didn’t understand.”

After that, they read what was on the scroll and made a decision, they would complete each task to let their dream come true.

“Soooooo, what’s first?”
She said in a board voice.

“Umm, here it says that we need to collect 2 gems that fit perfectly in the dent of the most magical mountains of China...”

“Well do you know where there are?”

“I’m trying to figure it out you know!”

“Ok sorry, JEEZ!”

“OH look, look at the back!!”
She said in disbelief.

“Ok great now we know where we can find the mountains, now we need to start the journey.”

“Sooo, here it says we need to fight with the vicious ants of the west and the hungry clouds of the north.”

“The hungry clouds of the west???”

“Well that’s what it says...”

She said.

“Ok now can we go and fight the ants?”

“Ok, lets go!”

So the two brave slaves started their journey to fight the vicious ants of the west, after a short while they saw the ants coming in their direction...

“Looook they are coming!!”

She yelled.

“But but they are so tiny.”

“True but you don’t know if they might sting you...”

Said the male slave.

The male slave started to step on the ant until they fought them all. But one didn’t die and gave them the first gem.

“Wait what, why are you giving me the gem?”

He asked one of the ants.

“You fought well and complete the task given so you deserved the gem.”

Said the only alive ant.

So then the two warriors started to head to one of the magical mountains to see if the gem fit in.

“Here, place it here.”

Said the man.

“Ok ok .”

“Yes it fits in!!!”

They said at the same time with the same enthusiasm.

“Ok now let’s head up the mountain because it says That we are supposed to put the gem in there.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense here it says that there are two mountains, am I like wrong or something?”

“Let’s just give it a try, you never know!”

She said with a proud voice.

So the two brave slaves started to go up the mountain until they spot a grey cloud.

“Look it’s the hungry cloud of the north!”

“ See I was correct it must be here where we have to place the gem!”

She said proudly.

“Ok but let’s not get to distracted! FOCUS!”

They started to fight with the cloud but it didn’t seem to work.

“It’s not going away what are we going to do now?”

“Remember how this cloud is called? It’s called ‘the angry cloud of the north’ so it must be hungry right?”

“How is that going to work?”

“Let’s just give it a go.”

He said.

So they started to toss some grass into the air , whilst it was starting to suck it all up with its mouth.

Before it left, the cloud left a gem.

“Look it left us a gem!”

She said in disbelief.

“Let’s try to place it in.”

He murmured.

They were both so afraid it wouldn’t of worked that they hugged each other for about 5 minutes.

“Look at the scroll does it say something?”

He said.

“YES LOOK WE HAVE DONE IT! Now it’s time for us to make a wish.”

“Ok so 3, 2, 1, MAKE A WISH!”

They both expressed a wish but both of the slaves fell into an everlasting dream.

“OH NO! WHERE ARE WE??”

“I TOLD YOU WE DIDN’T COMPLETE THE TASK GIVEN!”

THE END

TO BE CONTINUED...

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Bielew, Dominika – 11

Dan and Rad were sitting on the grey, IKEA sofa. Dan was scrolling through Instagram while Rad was reading Harry Potter.

“Oh my gosh! We have to watch the news. According to Instagram, they will be talking about UFOs!” Dan said while picking up the remote.

“Sure, but before we start , let’s read a booo...” “ Rad commented while being rudely interrupted by the news man.

“Hello and Welcome to China’s International News. I am Jefrey Moon and I will your reporter for today. Today we will be talking about a shooting in the North West hospital, pigeons attacking a pregnant woman, iPhone 12 coming out and a UFO landing on the Qing Ming (清明) mountain.” The news reporter said.

While watching the news for 20 minutes already they finally mentioned the UFO.

“ A UFO landed on the top of the Qing Ming (清明) mountain this is a clip of the scene.” The news man announced.

“Wait! Can you replay that?” Rad asked.

“Why?” Dan said

“Just replay it !” Rad shouted .

“Fine! Chill” Dan said calmly.

Dan replayed the clip.

“And pause! Pause it! “ Rad screamed. Dan then pause the clip of the UFO. Both Dan and Rad were confused trying to look for an idea in their mind what in earth could that be.

“ What is that ?” Dan asked then looked at Rad.

“ Well that might be a rock but the fact that alien’s dropped it makes a rock too basic. So in conclusion I think it might be a alien egg.” Rad answered Dan question in the most formal way possible because what other way would he have impressed his younger and more successful brother.

“We would be billionaires is we sold that thing!” Dan commented, “ like richer than Bill Gate!”

“ Firstly you are already rich. Secondly. Bill Gates ! The richest man on earth forget about it” Rad mentioned

“ Well fine but come on we can have an adventure,” Dan advised, “ like only us two!”

“ I guess I can write my China’s Magical Mountains essay actually being on a magical mountain!”

Dan and Rad then spent the rest of the afternoon packing for the trip. Then the next day they could get on the jet and go to the mountain.

6:18 am

Dan woke up. He first called up William , who is Dan’s private pilot, to tell him to pick them up at 6:50 so they can arrive at the mountain at 8:30. Then Dan went downstairs to wake Rad up.

6:30 am

Dan and Rad ate breakfast. Annabelle (their cook) cleaned up the plates and the cups from breakfast.

6:50 am

Dan and Rad already are on the plane. Rad sitting behind Dan in a row. Dan was drinking coffee and eating a bigger breakfast. Rad was reading his book and drinking his English breakfast tea.

8:30 am

They arrived. Looking at the QingMing (清明) mountain.

“Wowww!!!” Dan claimed. His jaw dropped. He reach to his pocket to get his phone. Then opened up the app Instagram to take a picture.

“ What do you think you’re doing!” Rad questioned. He snatched Dan’s phone and deleted all the pictures he took of the mountain, “ Now let’s start climbing.”

8:31 am

“ I can’t we have been walking for hours can we rest please?” Dan complained.

“ Dan honestly we have been walking for 1 minute and you’re complaining.” Rad explained to Dan

“Ok fine! We can order a DiDi? I can’t anymore!” Dan suggested

“Really. I thought you would never ask! Of course order the DiDi.” Rad agreed.

8:40 am

The DiDi finally arrived. It was a

My Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Brennan, Anna – 12

It is the beginning of time. The almighty panda god 花花 has decided that he is lonely in his heavenly palace. He thinks that he should make the earth full of friendly pandas and let them live where they like. So he used all his power to create an earth, which took him 1 week. Then, he started making pandas, one by the second. This took him 50 hours.

But suddenly, something else happened. He stopped making pandas and instead of fur and chubbiness, he started making dragons. Big, long, and all the different colours they flew to the earth and landed in lakes. And then, to his bigger surprise, he started making all sorts of different animals that we know today.

But that was not it. Instead of animals he started making these creatures with no fur whatsoever and only two legs! He tried to stop himself but it was too late. The creatures got up and started walking around on his earth! What to do?

“I have put these dangerous creatures on our earth,” he began, “you must live in the high ground to protect yourselves from them.”

With those words, he started making mountains of all shapes, colours and sizes for the pandas to live in. Then, he put lakes in them to let the dragons be safe too.

100000 years later.

“Dad!!!! 爱爱 took my necklace again!!!!”

安安 tore down the stairs and stood, fuming in front of her little sister,

“Honestly, you have such a hot temper!” said dad.

“It’s only because of 爱爱!”

“What I do?” she responded innocently.

“You know what you did. Give it back!”

“Fine!” 爱爱 stomped up the stairs.

“I wish she wasn’t so annoying,” said 安安.

“Come on, you can’t admit that she is not cute,”

“Well yes, but looks aren’t everything,”

爱爱 appeared at the bottom of the stairs and threw 安安’s necklace to her sister.

“Thank you, and don’t do it again,” said 安安.

爱爱 thrust her chin into the air and marched off to her room.

安安 ran outside into the fresh mountain air while adjusting her necklace. She ran through her village in the 红龙 mountains. Panting like a steam train, (she was a panda, after all) she stood, looking down onto the long, column mountains. She crawled into the bush nearest to her right. There was the same clearing that she had made 7 years ago, when she was 3. At first it was just for playing by herself. She would bring dolls with her but after a while it became a place to gather her thoughts and relax.

Her parents always told her NEVER EVER go down the mountainside as there was dangerous creatures down there. 安安 dreaded this thought but nevertheless she was very curious who those dangerous creatures were.

A pigeon swooped by over head. It was 果果, her messaging bird. 安安 jumped up and crawled back through the bushes. She tore down the steps, breathless. Through the village, through the front door and without even a second glance at her mum and dad, ran up the steps to her room and found 果果 nesting on a pile of old clothes that 安安 had prepared for him to rest on.

She still hadn't told anyone, but 安安 had a pen pal. Her name was 小苏 and she lived in the far North mountains called 北雪山 and they were really tall and had lots of snow on them. 红龙山 was in the South where it was always very warm. This was the letter:

Dear 安安,

How are you and your family? Sorry it took me so long to reply, 果果 got stuck under a pile of snow so I had to rest him for a few days. Mum and Dad have been busy, and as always 圆圆 has been stealing my necklaces again and wasting my mum's makeup.

I really want to meet you! I think it's time you told your parents about me and I'll do the same. I'm sure 爱爱 and 圆圆 would love each other!

Your loving friend,

小苏。

PS.

I built a snow panda! Do you like it?

安安 read the letter through twice while silently feeding 果果. Suddenly, she tore down the stairs and ran up to her Mum and Dad.

She told them everything about 小苏, 圆圆 and 果果.

"I think that's a great idea! We should definitely meet! Can you give me their address, and I'll write them a letter?" said Mum.

"Yes!!!!" Yelled 安安 and tore up the stairs.

She got out a piece of bamboo paper, a brush and some ink and wrote:

Dear 小苏,

I just told my parents and they said yes!! Mum is writing a letter to your parents and I will send it with 果果!

Can't wait to meet you,

安安.

She let 果果 rest for the rest of the day and in the morning tied both letters to his leg and opened the window for him to fly out.

2 days later 果果 came back with two letters on his leg. 安安 ran downstairs, gave her mum one and the other she opened herself.

Dear 安安,

My parents also said yes!! They received your Mum's letter and have now invited you to come to our house. Yay!!!

Your excited friend,

小苏.

安安 looked up at the clock. 2:55! She ran outside and up the peak, crawled into her bush and settled down to gather her thoughts. She was too excited! She found herself reading the letter over and over until her eyes got sore.

After dozing off for a few minutes, she ran back home to see what 小苏's Mum wrote.

"So, it's decided that we are going to their house. We will set off tomorrow morning," said Mum. "You will need to pack lots of warm clothes and all your essentials."

"Cool!!!" said 安安. "爱爱, you will get a new friend called 圆圆!"

"Yay!!!" yelled 爱爱.

安安 couldn't sleep that night. She was far too wriggly and excited!

It was a chilly when she woke up. She grabbed her bamboo bag and tore downstairs.

Her family were already at the door, ready to go.

"Come on!" Shouted 爱爱.

"I'm coming," said 安安.

They made their way through the village and across mountain tops. It got colder and colder the higher they got and they had to keep stopping to put on extra layers.

Suddenly, they saw something in the distance. They could only see the outline, but they knew what it was.

It was a human.

"Hide!" hissed Dad and they hid behind a pile of snow.

But it was too late.

It came at them with something small in its hand. Something square. It held it at a distance and something went 'snap'. Then, suddenly it took a huge jump and landed on 安安. She screamed and tried to push him off, but it had grabbed her leg. Her Dad then stepped up and gave a huge ROAR! He swiped at the human and he let go. Then it took something black out of his pocket and held it to her. She knew it was dangerous but she knew not to move or it would kill her. Dad took a big swing at the human and it fell, yelling down the mountainside.

"That was close," said Dad.

The rest of the journey they stayed really alert, but they didn't meet anyone on the way.

The next day they arrived at the 北雪山 village. They walked to number 8 and knocked on the door. A young panda answered the door.

“Are you 小苏?” Asked 安安.

“I sure am,”she said. “And you must be 安安!”

“You guessed it,”

“Come on in and I’ll show you my room!”

“Where is 圆圆?” asked 爱爱.

“圆圆! Come here! It’s 爱爱!” yelled 小苏.

A toddler about 爱爱’s age came running down the stairs. As if they were best friends, they gave each other a hug! The new friends laughed as she led them into a small, neat, living room.

“Come on, let’s go,” said 小苏.

They left quietly as the adults met and started talking to each other.

小苏’s room was small, pink and round!

The friends finally met and regularly visited each other. When they couldn’t see each other, they wrote letters. They now learnt never to go down the mountain as they knew how dangerous those humans were!

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Chang, Constance – 12

There has been a myth in Hong Kong stating that every dragon guarded a piece of magical jade. The jade is said to have powers to make you immortal and can also grant you as many wishes as you want. Several people have been on adventures trying to find one, but no one that went had ever come back, let alone ever finding one.

“Why do I need to come with you, on this “special business trip”. I have absolutely no interest of finding what your boss wants,” Bettie whined.

“Please Bettie, I have no choice but to take you, there will be no one to take care of you at home while I’m gone.”

Tree after tree flashed past as Elvina, Bettie’s mom drives past. The mountain ranges unfold in front of them, such a beautiful sight must belong to Hong Kong. Beneath the mountains, the ocean glitters under the intense glow of the sun. They drive on, finally reaching the claustrophobic city in time to see the sun dive behind the mountains where they had just been. The rest of the drive is silent, disrupted by the cheerful welcome of the hotel. They trudge their way up to their room, have a quick shower and fall asleep.

“You’re chosen.” A mysterious voice whispers.

Bettie stares at it in disbelief. A mountain stands right before her carving with several details no one, not even the finest craftsman could have created. A set of steps wind up to the top, each made of pearly-white stones, which matches the color of the mountain perfectly. It looks like a masterpiece made by the great goddess Athena herself. Up the stairs, on the top of the mountain sits a lonely temple and curled inside, sleeping, is a dragon.

Bettie opens her eyes and bolts up. She isn’t at the hotel anymore, but at the foot of the mountain she’s seen in her dream. Right next to her sits a tiny, wooden sign with the words “Pearl Mountain, the mountain of imagination” carved deeply on. She rubs her eyes, still there. Up the stairs she darts. The same thing.

Just like the dream, in the middle of the temple curls the same dragon she’d seen from before. Once, twice the dragon snorted and opens its eyes.

“Ah, you.” The dragon whispers in its mysterious voice, “The chosen girl.”

Bettie stares at the dragon in awe. Me, the chosen girl that got the jade everyone has been looking for in the past thousand centuries. Me, the chosen girl! The excitement finally finds a way out as she continues staring at the dragon, still can’t believe in her luck.

“Yes, just as I thought. Excited, aren’t you. Just like the people that had somehow found a way into me and my sibling’s mountain. You definitely hadn’t heard of the second part of the myth, have you. The part about giving up what seems to be the most important to you, which is the life of your mom, as you already had lost your dad during an earthquake? Ridiculous, I may say. Do you still want it, the jade?”

“Yes, the jade. I want it.”

“You sure, there’s no regretting in this trade.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Bettie wakes up again and looks around the room. No Elvina. In the middle of her palms, is a tiny gold embroiled jade. “I wish to have my mom, Elvina, back”.

A voice echoes as the ground splits open and when Bettie edges closer, she gets sucked in.

“No regrets.”

Mystery of the Dragons

Wellington College International Shanghai, Cheng, Nathan – 12

Long long ago, the dragons inhabited the beautiful mountains of China. These mountains were like a picture coming to life. The 6 dragons could control how the normal people who lived at the foot of the mountain. Although they had magical powers, they only used it for good things not evil deeds such as making it rain when villages needed growing crops. Normal people would not go up into the mountains as they heard legends that these dragons were evil and if you climbed up there, you would walk right into an illusion and the second you walked out of the illusion, there would be traps all over the floor and one wrong step, you're dead.

One day a man named Bob—a villager scientist wanted to go into to the frightening mountains to find these dragons as he was curious and has been studying about them for his whole life. Villagers were counting on him. Some person even came up to him and said, “All on you”. “Bob was ready to face whatever happens. It was a daring task, even if he died, he wished to see the dragons, maybe only for 1 second as no one has ever been so daring. After climbing thousands and thousands of meters, he suddenly heard growling sounds and rustling noises. He was frozen like a statue for almost 5 minutes waiting for the sounds again. Could the dragons have made these rustling sounds? Bob regained his courage and decided that he should check. He jumped over the spiky bushes and dodged trees until he came to a clearing. Six enormous dragons were camping around a fire. The fire was so big that it seemed it could touch the sky! Bob was amazed. He had finally caught a glimpse of these magical creatures. They were talking amongst themselves. Dragon number 1 was talking fast, and Bob could only hear parts of it. “How can we help the humans?” this was the only sentence he heard.

For a person who did not know or study dragons, it looked terrifying to them but to a person who studied dragons for his whole life, he understood everything except one thing—that dragons were friendly. One of the dragons saw him. Without thinking, he scrambled out into the bushes and hid in there. The only thing he never knew was that dragons were harmless. These dragons acted as if they see nothing and everything became normal again. Bob was still not satisfied. Something was bugging him at the back of his brain. He went back and talked with the dragons. The dragons were talking amongst themselves. Only after a while, they became friends. He talked with them as they knew how to speak the same language as him and it was easier for them to communicate. Years of training with the dragons, he had the same amount of magic as one of the dragons and the dragons let him to be free. Always, when he had power, he always thought of something bad and horrible. This was the only thing that the dragons did not know as Bob had kept this secret. He started descending the mountain, but quicker has he could jump longer distances and not wasting too much energy. The second, he came down these beautiful mountains he started to rob, kill and SLAUGHTER these innocent people. These dragons saw everything as they had a particular special power. It was long.

Once again, he got invited back to the mountains and he happily accepted it. He thought this time he was going to get new powers. He never thought this time he was going to die. When he finally reached the top, he was welcomed by 6 dragons hard cold stare as if it could pin right through you. At the same time, all the dragons asked him “What bad deed did you do?” obviously, he lied. Although he had the power of 1 dragon, he could not defeat all of them. The dragons ripped him alive into 6 parts and gave one to each dragon. They hid it safely as they did not want anyone to resurrect him. One of the dragons took pity on him and discussed with others that they should give Bob another chance. Each dragon went back and found their piece of him but one of them could not find it. They looked for it for a long time and found it sticking to him. They let him live and Bob became kind to others as if he was another person. He came back down from the mountain once again. This time all the people that lived at the bottom ran away from him, but he did not care and started to clean up this mess. One by one, people from the village saw and became friends with him. Everyone in China thought of him as a hero. Since then, more and more people have been going into the mountains to find the magic and the dragons. But none were even seen after Bob came down.

The Magical Mountains of China

Wellington College International Shanghai, Godin, Jules – 11

John sat back on the front of a dusty, wet rock. He gazed through the evening sunset as he felt the beauty hypnotizing him. But this feeling couldn't last long as he couldn't help thinking that his father's death was only 20 years ago on the very same day. On that day he was only 2 and the upcoming day was John's 3rd birthday. He never felt as much determined to find his dad's murderer as he was now. He decided to head down to the Guilin market to get some food and some rest to prepare for the mission that was awaiting him. As he was walking down the leafy path, he slipped on something unusual. John bent over to see what he had just slipped on, he rubbed the dust of a blank piece of paper, but for some weird reason, he had the intuition that this wasn't an ordinary one. So, he tucked it inside the back pocket of his black stained with ink shorts and walked ahead. 1 hour later, John arrived at the market, he was starving so he rushed to the oat and bread stall. He poked his hand right through his back pocket to see if he had some spare pennies, but together with them he pulled the piece of paper. John gasped. He saw that the paper had words written on it now, he had no time to waste so he nabbed a loaf of bread and threw the money on the table. A few minutes later, he slammed the door of his apartment. He was eager to find what was written on the paper, so he slipped it back out and saw words get magically displayed on it. When he was a kid, it was often said that if a courageous and brave men would climb the mountains of China, magic would be formed to tell him a pathway to his dream. John had mixed feelings about that. He felt anxious but excited too. On the inky piece of paper it was said an exact location that was known to be on the east of Guilin. John's only idea was to go there.

John was about to complete is 5th hour of hiking, he was sweating and felt dizzy as the sun was bright and it shone right on his head. The map was filling up with more details as he walked step by step to his destination, as he did not know what was there. When all hopes seemed gone, John distinguished a statue that looked familiar. As he got closer and closer he noticed something, and that was not the material it was built in, he had just understood that the map led him to the statue of his father. When John observed the statue in detail, he saw that there was an inscription engraved in it saying "If you want to find your next clue, look around for darkness, As you may know, I died near this place". John thought that everyone could see the inscription, as he silently tip toed to a young man that was having a friendly jog, John asked 'Can you see this'. Pointing at the inscription. But the jogger said he couldn't, in fact he could not even see the statue. As John got more and more confused, he just worked out the hint his dad gave him. John knew exactly what he meant. The day his dad died, they had a huge ceremony as he was head of the military organisation. It was right at that place that John was thinking about. So John found nothing else to do but to go there travel through the Mountains of China and once and for all... find who killed his dad.

As John was seeking for the nearby cave the intuition told him to go to. He tripped. He looked around for what this could have been caused by as he found a chest that was seen to be wrapped around with chain. Well John made a good choice to have brought his army knife with him. As he cut the chain in half, not even looking tired from all the hits he took to destroy it. He pulled out the cracked and heavy chest. John was wondering what could be inside as he was excited to find out. He snatched open the chest as he saw a bright and shiny sword light up to him and a shield that would help him through rough times. John asked himself why he would need these sharp and useful gear. He slipped the sword right back into the sheath that was hung up by the left side of his waist. He carried the shield with him to. As John continued to tread along the pathway, he suddenly heard a crackle. He checked in the nearby cave as he thought it might had been there. The mountains he and his dad always used to go on a hike opened. John's memories flew back. At the far side of the cave, John saw glowing fire eyes. As he silently walked through the old and dusty cave. Fire crackles came out a bit more underneath the glowing eyes. As the monstrosity of a thing showed up. John felt betrayed. His uncle was wearing a vapor hot suit with an oven crackling with fire ready for burns. John asked "What are you doing here?". As Uncle Jake had no time to answer, he simply said "Ahhhh another day, another to kill". Fire came roaring out of his mouth, John safely dodged the flames by flipping to one side and using his shield to block it. John felt angry, furious. confused and stressed. As John was tapping his feet on the ground silently behind a rock that had spiders on it. He thought of an idea. He ran out, and so he made some sound. Jake came to hunt for him as he slowly made himself out of the cave. John was only hiding beside a rock next to the

deadly cave, and so John went for it. He threw his shield in the middle of the oven so it got jammed. This meant Jake had no way to attack. As John leaped over Jake, he jumped on his hard, metal armour and placed his sword on Jake's neck. If he was not going to explain himself then he was going to be slaughtered to death. Jake started begging for help. He explained himself. He said that he was sent by a mission control near Vietnam so they could conquer Guilin as his father was head of the military organisation. Tears dripped down his cheeks. As John felt it was not fair that his dad died in heroe by the hand of murderers that remained unpunished, he asked Jake to join him in his quest for justice. "Let's go find that team that scouted my dad to kill him and bomb their area". John was ready. He slipped his sword back in the sheath and wiped his tears of. No matter how long, His dad's soul had to get back to him.

To be continued...

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Greener, Zahara – 11

The heavens fell into chaos. Two dragons both wanted power over Heaven. 'One must win and one must lose.' Said Mother before she disappeared. One was the water dragon and the other was a fire dragon. Every time the fire dragon tried to do damage; the water dragon extinguished the flames of anger. The water dragon had soon gained such a great reputation in the heavens it succeeded in impressing the emperor of the skies and thus became ruler of the heavens. The fire dragon was thrown off heaven and into Earth, its duty was to help the only newly created human civilizations. Angered and betrayed, the fire dragon smashed its head into one of the pillars holding the heavens up, it was the pillar of air. The most vital element. The oxygen from the air fueled the fire and permanently disappeared. Now there was a big hole in the sky.

◆ Four pieces left ◆

The story was passed on generation by generation. Rae had heard it so many times. She looked into her locket like she did every day. The mesmerizing blue and the degraded brass. Rae inspected the bolt. It looked different that day. She dug her fingernail into it and tried to pull it apart but it still remained closed. She got the closest sharp item, a needle, and tried again. This time there was movement and the locket fell into two. One piece lay on the bed and the other in her hand.

"Lay your little head on my lap

Where the stream ends there is a gap

Dear child there is nothing to fear

For the end isn't getting near"

On the other side of the locket, she found a key. Rae knew many locks in the household that had keys that were either lost or hidden. She looked around. Rae caught a glimpse of a green Qipao in the corner of eye.

"What are you doing there, Li An Rae? You were supposed to help me mop the floor," Rae recognized the raspy voice, it was Sister Qin, "who wants to marry a snobby girl who can't cook nor clean?"

"Why do I have to get married? Why do I have to cook and clean? Why?"

"Because you will one day have to search in hope for a wealthy man who will take you as a bride..."

"Pfft, I don't need no husband in my life, you will never make me look for love..."

"Rae! Listen to me!"

"Well, if every woman needs to be wed then where is my father?" said Rae in a whispery voice.

"Young Lady, I have told you many times and I will not repeat myself; we will not talk of the incident. What happens here stays here. Do not talk about your mother to anyone else."

"Is mother a widow?"

"Li An Rae!"

◆ Three pieces left ◆

Frustrated, Rae shut the door and her sight landed on the locket again. She flipped the locket and lifted up the key. There were three symbols, a daisy chain, a lantern and a stream.

Rae took a match and lit a lantern with it, opened her window and plucked a few daisies from her window box. She then proceeded to put on her prairie dress with lace and tulle which she spent the entire summer last year learning how to sew. The girl quickly scribbled down a note and fled through the window. She ran and ran until she saw a little trickle of a stream. Rae sat on a rock next to it, huddling herself to keep warmth from the wind. She wove the daisies into a chain. She then knotted the two ends together. At this point Rae was numb from the cold.

She tossed the lantern and the flower chain into the stream. She blew at it. At that moment, a lush green spark ignited. Then a burning flame joined in, a gush of water and finally, a mist of grey smoke. Rae felt dizzy, her head hurt, and her eyes were burning. She rest her head against the cold rock. All was pitch black. The wind murmured, the trees shook as if they were whispering, the water flowed, and the fire kept burning. Rae was unconscious yet conscious...

The heavens saw the signal. So, they sent Lillian. A woman who was as pale as snow, with skin as smooth as paper appeared. She had little dimples at the side of her cheeks. She had rosy lips and hazel freckles. She was tall, skinny and was fair. Her delicate hands stroked the little girl. She sprinkled some sort of ground up rock salt on the girl's chest. At that moment, a flower bloomed in its place, the petals were dripping pearls of dew. The pearls of dew then were

set ablaze. The last element before completion and the summoning of her sisters was the girl. The girl inhaled then exhaled. The prophecy was completed.

◆ Two pieces left ◆

Rae looked into the stream and peered at her reflection. She was wearing a cloak made of shadows from the depth of the darkest realms. The cloak corrupted her skin, and she was ashy grey. She ignored her troubles and stared down deeply at the woman.

“W—what happened to you child,” the woman stared deeply at the girl, “your mother was so elegant yet you’re in this sloppy, disgraceful mess.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Rae replied harshly, the words stinging her tongue.

The woman stared solemnly at Rae.

“What do you mean child. You are the last of your kind!”

“I am?”

“Yes.”

All was quiet. Overwhelmed, confused and annoyed, Rae grasped her arm and felt how cold it was. Frost was growing on her skin, the darkness spread, the anger ignited, the leaves flaked off her skin. Time slowed down. Rae was irritated.

“You have the burden to carry on your mother’s duty, you will always be responsible for it,” Said the Woman startling Rae, “you must trust me. I have insight and I will help you! Call me Lillian.” Lillian said this whilst holding Rae’s hand. Rae looked at Lillian

“How do I trust you?”

“I was your mother’s assistant and right—hand lady though I served mainly in the Water Court.”

“You were?”

“Yes.”

“But why I am I this way, why does it have to be me?”

“Ah well, you know how there is hole in the sky? The pillar that got destroyed was the Air pillar. You see. We are powered by the pillars; they contain our strength, mentality and powers. If a pillar gets destroyed then that certain element loses something, for you, that was your control. Ever since the last 1,000 years all the successors were cursed with that. Of course, your mother knew that and controlled it, she was wonderful. You on the other hand grew up in a human world, no one is as unique as you, which means that you never knew you had these powers. You had gone corrupted as all the darkness your power contains expanded.”

“What should I do?”

“Fix the pillar.”

“How?”

“Close your eyes.”

Rae closed her eyes. She felt the air beat against her and swish through her hair. She opened her eyes when she felt the wind stop.

“This is the palace of the heavens,” Lillian declared. Rae remembered how it looked so similar to the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City, “Girls, gather round me!”

Rae touched her arm. It was covered in scales. She looked at the other girls. They had scales as well.

◆ One pieces left ◆

One of the girls were wearing a dress made entirely of lilies, vines and ivy. Starlings rested on her shoulder. Another dressed in a silken attire and a jellyfish skirt, wore pearl shoes that was composed of water. The last girl, standing far away from everyone, had a glistening frock which was sparking with a burning, bright fire. She had a cape made only of a flame and smoke.

“Hello, I’m Aqua.” said the most elegant one, the water dragoness.

“I am Eva.” said the gentle, youthful girl, the earth dragoness.

“Hi, I’m—” There was a large silence, it was so quiet you could hear a needle drop somewhere in the palace, “uhh, I’m Fyre.” said the last girl uncomfortably twitching and fidgeting.

“Meet Rae.” said Lillian.

“How do you know my na—”

“—I just do,” snapped Lillian sharply, “be nice to her.” Lillian mentioned whilst looking at the three girls. Lillian then swiftly disappeared through the crowd of people

“Show me to the pillar please.” Rae said humbly.

“You do it Fyre, me and Aqua need to tend the Rivers and the Corals.” replied Eva.

“Thats grammatically incorrect, it should be “Aqua and I” and plus no.” Fyre answered.

“Please!” begged Aqua, “I always do things for you, it’s only this one time you get fed up and quit! In the name of the Lord, Fyre, just do it.”

“Ugh fine! Is that what you wanted to hear?” By the time Fyre finished saying the sentence Aqua and Eva had already left.

“I can’t do this, especially what we, the Fires, have done to your kind. I’m sorry Rae, but I just cannot.” uttered Fyre.

“Well then bring me to someone who will take me there.”

“Then we must go to the Elders.”

“The Elders?”

“That’s the most I can do for you.”

Fyre led Rae through all the whispering highly respected citizens living in temples and in the palace. Through a door Rae saw an old husky man sitting on a chair. He was drinking tea and chatting to those around him.

“Sorry to disturb your afternoon, your majesty, but please could you show Rae to the pillar of air please?”

“Who is that Rae you speak of?” demanded the Elder.

“Me, sir.” Rae said quietly as she could to try seem normal.

“You! The successor of air who we lost among the Human population. I must show you.”

Fyre waited patiently outside the room Rae currently was in. She was led up a staircase and up to a cold and windy platform where she saw a plinth of a pillar and nothing more.

“Only you, my friend, are allowed to go on the pillar and touch it. Try it, climb on top.”

Rae did what she was encouraged to do and climbed on top with all her might. The pillar was large compared to her. Rae hushed the wind with a gentle touch of her fingers and built an invisible staircase with a flick of her hand. Rae climbed up and rested herself. There was a keyhole in pillar right next to a crack. It was shaped in such a familiar way. Rae suddenly remembered the key attached to her locket, took it out and put it in. It worked like magic. The pillar started to shift and a piece of the pillar tumbled down. Rae started to sing the words:

“Lay your little head on my lap

Where the stream ends there is a gap

Dear child there is nothing to fear

For the end isn’t getting near”

The words were sweeter than honey, the tune was familiar in an odd sense of way. The words ‘jamais vu’ swirled in her mind and she suddenly remembered the distant time in her memory when her mother used to sing the exact sweet tune to her.

◆ No pieces left ◆

All the fragments of time unified. Rae felt the empty half of her complete. She smiled a true smile. She couldn’t remember the last time she smiled. She didn’t care anymore as she was happy.

All It Takes to Make a Bird Fall

Wellington College International Shanghai, Hong, Yixuan – 12

Lu: The first rays of morning light tardily trickled into my bedroom, wordlessly waking me up. I stirred, and following a yawn, my body found the willpower to prop up. The fuzzy feeling was rare yet precious. Sunlight struggled and squeezed and squirmed through laced curtains before sprinkling like confetti on my lap. I dressed, consuming the time that morning had left me. The morning dragged into noon. My leather boots kissed the tiles tenderly. As soon as my front foot left the house, it gave way to a feathery figure that swooped from the skies. In a fraction of a second, I was soaring a hundred feet above sea level; adrenaline coursed through me as I sailed the skies. Bai's widespread wings fluttered at seemingly the speed of light. His beak sliced through the white fog that soaked the mountains; clouds, at fingers' reach.

I gazed at the blood-red patch that encrusted his white feathers and ran my hand through it, messing with the streamlined alignment. A smile flickered across my complexion. He nudged against my arm and nipped at my hair in return. Our feet greeted the thousand-foot drop to the bed of the sea of clouds; we leaned against each other, lightheartedly perched on the scabrous cliff of the Yellow Mountains.

Ping! An arrow disturbed my thoughts and forced itself into the ground. The yellowing bamboo paper tied to it was more than familiar; it had been harassing them for more than two weeks. The faint fragrance of expensive ink lingered in the air around the practiced characters. "Greetings from the magnificent city, darling. Last night I dreamt of you and me married. You are the last piece to making that dream come true. Your word of agreement will take you to riches you could never imagine, houses with gold tiled roofs, and tables with the most exquisite food. Please, leave the mountains—they are nothing more than a pretty ornament; am I not better, more handsome and richer than that wild white bird you speak? I trust you will fall for me, all in time." Ugh, I groaned. Disgustingly sickening sweet. And bitterly chilling on second thought. This had been the seventh letter from the duke, who fancied an attractive new wife after exiling his previous one. And I had been his target.

Nauseating, the Imperial city was nauseating. The rich wore jade robes while the poor were in tattered rags. They ate exquisite meals while the homeless were living off grime, filth, and whatever crumbs of dirt stricken, water-soaked staples they managed to scout. Yes, this was the very person who had sworn his love for me, which he did with each of his four ex-wives.

Besides, Bai was here, and that was enough.

Letting go of the letter was like easing a ton of bricks. I watched the letter sway side to side before descending to a depth beyond sight. Bai ruffled his feathers; his crystal-cut eyes bright.

Another few days sped by, and I can feel the duke's patience burning out. If all goes well, he'll leave me to the serenity of the mountains. Flipping the thick ivory-shade bamboo paper to a close, I sighed as I processed the content. Something about a carriage. And chains. My vision clouded, mostly from the over-intake of information. My eyes shut, and in the darkness of my eyelids, white blotches were pressing against my eyeballs. Carriage. Chain. What else? Oh, I remember, he swears he will uproot the mountains from its foundations if I refuse him; laughable.

I knew I shouldn't have laughed when the fifty battle coaches descended from the skies.

Coaches fully armed with troops and herds soldiers. Fear filled and flooded my eyes. They watered with sheer fright, raw-cut, and spine-stabbing.

Every slender finger of mine was coated with cold sweat.

The sun was too vivacious to make out the coaches, but I knew they were advancing with every second.

I ran, as fast as my legs would take me, courage faltering with every stumble along the way.

Swoosh! A huge shadow dawned on me. I halted my staggering steps and looked up. A display of long, neat feathers, lined up in a perfect streamlined array, shaded me from the sun.

Miscellaneous emotions boiled together, stewed in my heart. My eyes followed the silhouette above because that was all I could do: watch. A fragile body of white feathers was the only thing between me and my death. A sharp rust-colored beak glinted as it dove into the soldiers' neck, bringing with it blood and flesh that sprayed everywhere, that dyed the beak one shade closer to sinister. The soldier gurgled; with one last exclamation of panic, he died. Blurs of movement and the pungent scent of blood encompassed me.

Squawk! A lonely drop of blood broke away from the vessels that crisscrossed and entwined within Bai's body; it oozed and inked his white feathers, before losing grasp and finally, with much anguish, plopped onto my pain-stricken face. An empty hole burned through him; an empty feeling burned in me. My face twisted into a strangled cry, creases of worry illuminated in the morning light.

Batting his wings, he persisted ever so hard against his fall. For the first time, his tender eyes hardened with desperation. Why did he have to go through this? A pang of guilt and remorse strikes me. The duke wanted me, I refused, and now all of the mountains have to pay.

The rough surface of the mountain was merciless to Bai's fall. Blood drenched, dirt-smeared. But I don't care. Without second doubt, I embraced him, ignoring the filth on his feathers; memories of their once white appearance come flooding back. With a hoarse, wavering voice, I whispered: "You'll be all right." Over and over, like a mantra; like if I kept saying it, a miracle would occur.

It didn't. The morning left, taking with it his life. All it takes to make a bird fall was a noble thought, a courageous heart, and an act of stainless selflessness.

An ear-thundering moan of agony ripped my throat as I unleashed a sound that was so foreign yet that felt so right. It tore a gash in the sea of feelings and all those emotions came pouring out like a gushing waterfall. Hatred. Sadness. Soul tearing, mind shredding resentment at the fragility and feebleness of mortals; how we were merely play-puppets tied to destiny's sinful fingers.

Delicately, I put it down; both the dispirited thoughts and Bai's body. If I had looked in a mirror that day, even I would've been terrified of the malicious, vengeful smile that I had worn. You only become half-person half-beast when sentiment becomes revenge. Smiling, I thrust a dagger into a soldier's thigh. Then laughing, I shot an arrow into another's eye. Then giggling, my blade carved a long red scar on a neck. The duke's neck. Three words flew over my shoulder as I snickered at his frantic look at the blood flowing from his neck. "You deserved it." The Yellow Mountains had become a bath of blood, sin, and wrongdoings that seemed so right.

The first rays of dusk tardily trickled out from between the clouds. Smiling, I lay next to Bai. How I would love to see the first rays of tomorrow's light dribble into my bedroom, then wordlessly wake me up. Soundlessly, I stroked the red patch that encrusted Bai's feathers. A boiling hot tear scarred my cheek. My heart felt empty, so did my body. But maybe that was because of the huge gash in my chest. Breathing tenderly, immune to the pain and the acrid smell of ripped flesh, the muscles on my face twitched upwards into the brightest smile I could muster. And as the sun inched under the mountains, I departed.

Bai: I wanted to see the last sunset with Lu. But that's out of reach. Legend has it that if a bird does die, its corpse evaporates into mist; so I have faith that I can still be with her. Lu, you guard the mountains, and I'll guard you.

Lu: So I did.

To this day, Lu's spirit still lives with us. She rests on the Yellow Mountains situated in Anhui and is known to us as the "Guest-greeting pine" or the "Ying Ke Song" which overlooks the mountains. Bai, on the other hand, did become mist. His soul melted into the "Sea of Clouds" that surrounds the seventy-two peaks that make up the Yellow Mountains.

The Dream

Wellington College International Shanghai, Katsarska, Bea – 12

It was foggy. The only things I could see were the trees' peaks, towering over me and the fog. There was nothing for me to do there, other than to breathe. Breathing in. And out.

For once in my life, I was calm. The quietness just, just brought me to peace. I was smiling. I was happy, but then suddenly, I ware the sound of a gong...

"DING, DONG!" It was my alarm.

Usually, the first thing I'd do when I wake up is to make my bed. However, today was different. I turned on my back, my grayish-blue eyes staring at the surprisingly clean sealing and thought. Why was the dream so vivid? Almost as if it were real, I could actually touch, feel, smell, hear and move normally. I couldn't tell If it was just a dream.

Ten minutes might have past, maybe even less. But it wasn't long before I heard my sister's obnoxious voice, coming from downstairs.

"Manny, breakfast is ready!" Judge me all you want but she is the most annoying little five-year-old with buck teeth and long hair there could be! I was eight when she was born. Best eight years of my life.

I got up, made my bed and went to brush my teeth. Then I washed my face, hoping my freckles would magically wash off...but they didn't. My ginger hair was particularly tangled today and its length didn't help my case. Finally, I got back to my room and and went with my go-to outfit – a hoodie and sweatpants. Then it was time for breakfast.

The smell of oatmeal could be whiffed from my room upstairs. However, it wasn't Jenny's, my sister, voice I could hear. It was our TV.

"I swear I've been there! Everything was so clear!", said the man on the news. His clothes were ripped up, he had long, great beard and hair and his face resembled a raisin. The title at the bottom of the screen said: "Crazy guy on the streets claims to have visited China's mountains".

"Look, Manny! That guys is even more delusional than you!", Jenny cackled. I swear she was a witch in her past life, sent here to torture me.

"Jenny! You need to stop terrorizing your brother!", yelled my mom. She always had my back. "But that guy does sound like a lunatic." Never mind. If I were to tell her about my dream, she'd probably think I'm crazy! I just had one question, why were people saying he is a psycho? It was better If I did some research myself.

After breakfast, I ran back to my room and sat on my desk. I turned on my computer and decided to look up the mountains. However, I didn't know where to start, like where were the mountains from? Maybe that guy wasn't crazy and they were from China?

Suddenly, it clicked.

I remembered something! The trees, on one of them, there were Chinese characters carved in. Chinese for sure. I just had a breakthrough!

Since my computer was already open, I went on Tringle to look up China's mountains and what I saw was the second most-shocking thing I'd ever heard (after finding out that penguins have knees)! Every website I looked at said that China was a dried-up and abandoned place! However, it wasn't always like that. Two thousand years ago, China was full of forests and mountains, until a giant wind fire came and destroyed the whole country. But even with all that information, my gut was still telling me I was right...

After a good twenty minutes of thinking, I figured it out! Even though pictures weren't invented yet at the time, painting was still a thing. I tringled paintings of mountains and when I tell you I passed out, I mean it. I saw the exact same painting like my dream – tall trees, fog and Chinese characters carved in the bark of one of the trees! The feeling of victory was the best feeling I'd felt in a while.

Things were working out pretty well for me – I had oatmeal and a whole “realizing I am special” moment. However, I didn’t know what to do next. Tell someone? Try to find the person from the News?

Realistically, I only had two options – make everyone think I was insane, or find the man. Spoiler alert, I went with option two.

The street from the News was pretty popular in Sofia, where I lived. It was the only street with Bulgarian culture, so it wasn’t hard to find.

When I got there, loud music was playing by an accordion. People were dancing and tourists were buying junk they didn’t need for an unrealistically high price. It was sunny and the News crew seemed to be gone. I stopped to look around and there it was!

I walked up to the spot, but the man wasn’t there! Instead, there was a note, so I picked it up, without knowing what would happen next...

The only thing I could see was flashes but after that, I was there, the mountain! The fresh air, the fog, the trees – all the same! Except for the fact that this time, the man from the News was there.

“Nice to see you, Manny, I’m Yu Cheng!” Said the man in a very quiet and calm voice.

“Ok, where am I!? How did you bring me here and how can I come back home?” I started freaking out.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be back before you know it! However, before you go, I need your help. WE need your help.” He said.

“You know it’s illegal to hold people against their will, right?” I asked.

“Not here though. Anyway, after China burnt down, the Magical Mountains became invisible to the human eye. However, because the mountains have been invisible for too long, they, along with everything on them, are starting to disappear. We already asked two people for help, but they failed and perished, just like China. You’re our last hope!” Yu explained.

“So, what do I have to do to help without being burned alive?” My sarcastic self was really showing.

“You see this tree, the one with the Chinese characters on it?”

“Yeah?”

“Burn it. That’s all you have to do. It’s only a tree, what could possibly go wrong. Here, use this,” He passed me a match. “and we’ll all be saved, thanks to you.”

“I’m sorry, but no. It’s completely ignorant to think that just because it won’t make an impact to you, it won’t impact anyone or anything else. If I burned this tree, the whole mountains would burn too. Is that what you want?” I was furious.

“Are you sure?” He asked.

“Yes.” I didn’t even hesitate. However, what happened next really surprised me.

He started clapping. And smiling. Why though?

“You did it! You saved us! You are the only person to truly know the importance of thinking not only about yourself, but also others. All of the other foolish children did what I told them and perished. You didn’t.” Not long after Yu said this, people started coming out from the deepest parts of the mountains and started cheering. I was proud.

“So, can I go back now?” I asked.

“Yes, you can! And again, thank you!” Yu snapped his fingers and...

“DING, DONG!” My alarm started ringing.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Lam, Lee Tong – 12

The morning sun shone through the valleys of the majestic mountains. The beaming rays of light are like golden water poured down from the sky. The village on the mountain side was still very quiet, waiting for the roosters to wake them.

Tang was eighteen, he was good friends with Linh— a beautiful girl since young. Everyone told him that he would be a good couple with her, and yes, he was in love with her. Tang had black and shiny eyes, like marble balls. Linh had deep black hair which was smooth as glass. Tang had a very bright face and sharp features. There was a problem, Linh's family won't agree that they can marry each other or be in love. She tried to persuade her parents, but none worked. There was only one option left. To run away. Tang and Linh knew that they would have to be strong for the next few days. They decided to go to the peak of Phoenix mountain. Tang heard that it was like heaven up there. His goal was to reach the peak with Linh and to live there, free. He told Linh the plan and finally, it was time to leave. He prepared for the journey, taking some water, food and clothing.

Tang crept out of his home, secretly. He met Linh at the village well, taking one last glance at their village. They started hiking towards Phoenix mountain...

After a while, the village was nowhere in Tang's sight, everything was unfamiliar. The sun was high in the sky, shining on him, as if it was telling him to be courageous. The trees around made him feel safe like being cradled. The flowers bloomed in every colour in every way, reminding him that life was lovely and wonderful.

As Tang kept on walking, he saw a meadow with beautiful flowers. He decided to take a rest there. He told Linh to rest and they sat down on the grass. They ate a few loafs of bread he took with him. He looked at Linh in the eyes. Linh said, "There will be many challenges ahead, and we will have to face it together."

"Yes, we will. We chose to go, so we won't regret it." Tang replied.

The wind blew. It wasn't very strong, but it was a sign telling Tang and Linh to move on. They packed up their stuff and got up. They walked until they met a flowing stream. The stream was clear as air. Every detail of the bottom of the stream was visible. Tang refilled his and Linh's bottles with the water. He drank some of it, there was a hint sweetness to it. As he kept traveling, the temperature dropped. It was getting cold, so he put on his coat from his bag. He noticed that there are less plants and more rock, it was making him nervous, but not enough to stop him. His feet was numb, but didn't just call it a day.

The sun was setting and a red glow filled the sky. Not long after, the sun was gone, hiding behind the mountains. Tang and Linh finally decided it was time to sleep. They got under a tree and fortunately there was grass under it, they won't have to sleep on the hard surface of rock. The tree was a shield, making Tang feel safe. He lay down, so tired after today. It wasn't a great place to sleep, but the best he could find. They stared into each other's eyes, until Tang broke the silence. "Today was tough, and tomorrow will be tougher. We must get to the Phoenix mountain before we run out of food and water. Phoenix mountain will be like heaven so we can enjoy the rest of our lives there."

"Yes, I have faith in us. We are going to make it." Linh said.

"Let's rest," Tang whispered. "We need energy for tomorrow."

"Goodnight." Linh said gently.

"Goodnight." Tang murmured...

A yellow bird gazed at Tang and Linh from a branch on the tree. It flapped its wing, no response. It chirped, no response. It shrieked loudly, they opened their eyes. Tang sat up straight, he couldn't see properly. There was a big fog, covering his sight. He could barely see the bird.

"Oh no, the fog is too thick, we can't see clearly. How would we see the direction we are going!" Linh exclaimed as she sat up.

The bird landed on the ground, flapping its wing, getting Tang and Linh's attention. Linh gazed at the bird in wonder. The bird continued to flap its wing, as if it was trying to tell them something. It pointed its head toward somewhere and looked back. "Perhaps we should follow it, in the fog we can't see anything," Linh suggested. "It might lead us the right way, maybe god sent it to guide us."

As Tang and Linh stood up, the bird flew up too. They packed their bags and walked towards the bird. It flew slow enough to let them follow. They were keeping close to the bird because of the fog. The bright yellow colour of the fog also helped them to follow. They were getting higher and higher as they followed. The ground was almost all rock except for some dirt and bushes. After a while, the sunlight was beaming through the fog like millions of shining blades. The fog was thinning, it was easier to see. They didn't stop yet, kept climbing up. Tang saw the last patch of bush leave behind, now it's only rock. *After this point, it's going to be tough* he thought. The fog was almost gone, they could see the greyish-blue sky. The bird flew up high into the sky and disappeared from their sight. They will continue without the bird guiding them. They were close to their destination, the mountain peak was visible. Tang and Linh traveled until they met an old man sitting on a rock. The old man's eyes were closed, eyebrows tight together. It was clear that he was in pain.

"Hello, what are you doing here? Are you hurt?" Tang asked.

The old man raised his head and looked up at them. "I was traveling up to the mountain peak. I fallen on a sharp rock and hurt my leg. I cannot travel anymore nor go back down."

Tang thought for a moment. "I will carry you down."

Tang looked at Linh. "You go to the peak first, stay safe. I promise I will come to find you. I have to help him, I can't leave him to die."

Linh sighed, "I really don't want you to leave me, but I know you have to do it. Be safe and come to find me as soon as possible."

"Hmm," the old man suddenly brightened up. He stood up, looking healthy and strong. "I am actually the god of Phoenix mountain, and the peak is a very special place, only worthy people can stay there. I can see that you are kind and caring. You are worthy enough for a place here, but only *you* can stay."

"Only me?" Tang exclaimed. He was shocked by the god pretending being an old man, but only allowing him to live on the peak shocked him further. "We came here so we could live together, I would never leave her alone!"

"Tang," Linh said gently. "If you want to live there, go ahead, don't worry about me. It is my problem that my parents don't allow us to be in love. You don't even have to come with me here, you could just have married another girl. But always remember that I love you."

"No, I won't leave you. I came here with you because I love you, why would I just leave you behind? It is not your fault because of your parents." Tang replied with confidence.

"Hmm..." The god muttered to himself.

Tang and Linh looked at the god. He told them, “I see that you love each other very much, perhaps I would let you both stay. On one condition, you must love each other forever. This place is a place of happiness, if you don’t love each other anymore in the future, why stay here?”

Tang and Linh looked at each other in the eye and said with confidence, “Yes we will love each other forever. Thank you for giving us this opportunity.”

“Then you can stay.” The god said. He snapped his finger.

Suddenly, Linh and Tang was at the peak of the mountain. The god was nowhere to be seen. The peak of the mountains was nothing like below. Instead of rocks, it is filled with nature. Tress, grass, flowers, creatures of every kind... It was like the garden of Eden. Tang and Linh was amazed by all this, this place unimaginable. They ran around like children and wondered around like adventurers. There was countless fruits on trees for them eat, a million types of flowers to smell and many friendly and cute creatures. They were so happy and smiled at each other. Linh leaned forward, and kissed Tang.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Lee, Boyi – 11

"Today's my birthday!" That thought screamed happily through Hualing's mind when she opened her eyes from her bed.

She stretched her arms out as the sunlight shone brightly across her face. The rooster crowed loudly as ever. She was a curious and adventurous 12 years old girl that adored the beauty of nature. Hualing and her parents were from a humble family, full of love. They lived in a remote village on a mountain named Mount Tai, selling bread for living. She also had a pony with soft black fur called Dark Knight who Hualing treated as best friend. Everything was fine until Hualing's mother fallen sick 2 years ago. They tried every possible medicine but the situation never truly improve.

After her daily Kung Fu practice with her father, she went back into the house.

"Remember the "Spin Kick", it was the ultimate Kung Fu inherited from our ancestor! It should be 360 degrees spin in the air, and 90 degrees for the kick, not below nor above. More importantly control your "Chi"! This knock can be vital but it can protect you from danger combined with the flow of Chi ." Father reminded her.

"Yes, I know father, you told me thousand times about my fists too!" Hualing playfully spoke.

It was night, the sky was dim, enlightened by the source of moonlight, flashing through her window.

"Happy birthday Hualing!" Her mother exclaimed with delight.

"For your birthday gift, I give you the story of our ancestors, The Powerful Flower Of Cure." Her mother spoke softly.

Her father sat next to her mother, stroking her cold hand into his warmth. Mother lied in the cozy bed with a pale face.

"Long ago, there once lived a caring and generous Kung Fu master called Jia Long. He hosted some apprentices to learn Kung Fu in a forestry temple. Jia Long had a very clever apprentice called Li Shu, but laughed at others if they were wrong or slow in practice. Li Shu becoming snobbish and arrogant with his genius intelligence. One day, Li Shu left the temple abruptly because Jia Long refused to teach him one ancient martial art, afraid of him misuse the power. After 10 years, Li Shu was said to invade the temple and try to challenge Jia Long to be the best Kung Fu master. Li Shu's Kung-fu ways were strong but full with hatred. Jia Long refused to fight him. Li Shu saw this as insult, became rampant and killed a dozen of young apprentices before Jia Long could react. To show him goodness and also buy time for the young apprentices to escape, Jia Long stood and used his 'Chi' to build an

He not only gave us a place to call home, when he died it was told that he dropped the seeds near his tomb, with 'flower of cure' which can cure many sickness.

Hualing's eyes glinted as bright as stars. 'Maybe that could cure my mother!'

But the tomb was guarded by Li Shu's dark apprentices and no one could go near there. Hualing felt that it was her destiny to find the flower of cure, she begged the dragon to help.

After much persuasions, the dragon carried Hualing to the other side of Shi Long Tan, where 'flower of cure' was known to be grown.

The dragon arrived silently to the dark gigantic temple.

Hualing saw Li Shu and his guards standing there, guarding the Garden of Peace, obviously having sensed Hualing's presence. He gazed from above, staring into her eyes.

"No one could steal the flower of cure, it is mine!!" Proud Li Shu laughed to himself and the guards with a malicious grin.

The dragon swooped down with lightning speed, and blowed fire with his nostrils towards the guards.

When confused Li Shu turned his back, she punched him with power, hard in the face. But this was not enough. She knew there was something more ultimate. Stronger. More powerful. It suddenly came into her mind.

"Take this!" Hualing shouted in the top of her lungs.

At the key moment of the battle, she spun in the air, showed her ultimate "spin kick" with the strongest flow of "Chi". Her white robe flying and did what was done. The force was so strong and it formed a tornado with Hualing at the center of storm eye. A flash of light was just to be seen before Li Shu could even react.

Li Shu lied lifeless on the ground.

With outstretched arms, Hualing quickly took the flower of cure and went back to dragon.

"Yes! Let's go tell the others of our success!" Her tears dried instantly, a mask of happiness shining upon her face.

The dragon nodded in agreement, tired .

Young children and the elders hugged them, eyes twinkling with tears of joy. Relieved they were safe.

"Young Hualing, you really are our hero! Thanks for saving us and overcome our fear!" Exclaimed the villagers.

invisible shield to defend Li Shu's aggression. Ultimately, Jia Long exhausted all his Chi and disappeared from the thin air. Legend said he was reborn to be "The Flower of Cure" due to his sacrifice that will bring kindness in the darkness."

"We now give you this necklace with a dragon pendant, to symbolize our ancestors." Mother muttered, giving it with her bare hands.

"What?! Are we the descendant of Jia Long?" Hualing stammered with joy and shock.

That night, she just gazed at the ceiling, clutching tightly to her dragon necklace, suddenly a piece of paper fell out of the pendant.

"Looks like a map". Hualing studied it closely and it showed the path to "flower of cure", near a place called Shi Long Tan.

"Was this an adventure journey for me?" she murmured and gradually fell asleep.

One day when she was riding Dark Knight in the forest, she heard a howl of pain nearby...She followed the sound and found out it came from a creature.....a dragon! She noticed that the dragon looked exactly like the one on her necklace! The dragon was wounded in a very bad state and growling. Feeling empathy and connected with the dragon, she quickly put healing leaves over the large wound, used her white bandages to wrap it up.

"Thank you. What is your name?" the dragon looking at Hualing with his gleaming emerald eyes and grand voice.

"You can talk! My name is Hualing! Why are you damaged so badly?" For some reason, Hualing was not afraid of this talking dragon.

"My enemy attacked me by shooting me with a huge arrow whilst I tried to escape to my home at Shi Long Tan." The dragon stared at her with curiosity.

"Shi Long Tan? That is the place in my dragon pendant!" Hualing galloped in her mind with excitement.

" Can I join your journey to Shi Long Tan?" Hualing asked nervously.

The dragon nodded. Next, Dark Knight galloped along with the dragon, off they went to Shi Long Tan.

Not soon, they arrived. A temple stood there with magnificence. It was coated red and gold paint. Little boys and girls wore Kung Fu robes, practicing with concentration. Colorful dragons of all sorts were flying around.

In the middle of fountain, there stood a male statue with Kung Fu robe.

"He is Jia Long. our founding father", a young kid kindly introduced.

"Thank you! But it is time for me to say farewell. I have to retrieve this flower to my ill mother." Hualing told them, hugging everyone goodbye.

There galloped Dark Knight, and in no time, they were back to Mount Tai.

"Home!" Hualing was looking at her family's small house! She could not believe they were back from this adventure.

"Mother! Father! I am back! I retrieved the flower of cure!" Hualing raced with the flower in her small hand, running as fast as lightning.

"Hualing! We have missed you! Where have you been in the last few days?" Father and mother touched her warm face, on the verge of tears.

"I did not think it was possible! The flower of cure...how?" Stammered father by her face.

On a table, was a small book lying there. It noted "Magical Ingredients". She flipped to the page of "The Ultimate Cure". Through the list, she added hot water and mixed it with two petals of the flower. It instantly dissolved into the water, and smelled a scent of...hope! Hualing's mother carefully sipped the precious creation, after a night sleep, she was able to stand up!

"I feel like...my legs are back! It's all back!" She energetically shouted out.

Everyone came to see what was it...and were astonished seeing Hualing's mother back on her own feet! Everyone became very cheerful. Hualing planted the flower in the heart of the village to help anyone who was critically ill.

Poets wrote beautiful poems about her; *"Her journey, one of thy mighty prophecy, withstand dark power to unleash the Chi, peace and beauty to us you see, thy flowers yellow, nature green, Hualing a girl never seen."*

Now, pure white flowers and all kinds blossom, everyone singing the song of merry. She was now a grown woman, training young apprentice to master the Chi and communicate with dragons, still with the dragon amulet on her neck.

This was the story told for generations of the mountain of peace; Mount Tai.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Liu, Kevin – 12

As legend goes, the Jade Sword once was wielded by the feared bodyguard of emperor Qin, Cao Zheng the “Immortal Slayer”. According to folklore, the sword was crafted by a master sword smith, renowned for making magical swords for the heavenly gods. The Sword was forged from iron, mined in the depths of hell, dipped in the blood of dragons and beaten with the bones of dead men. It has a reputation for being the sharpest and strongest sword between heaven and hell. The blade reflected light, like the sun beaming off the moon. The handle was assembled from white jade, with gold tigers imprinted across the ornate surface. The sword’s sheath was a luxurious snakeskin with golden attachments.

Cao Zheng was first presented with the sword by the great emperor Qin Shi Huang for heroic deeds at the battle of Phoenix Crossing, where Cao gallantly took on one hundred men, single-handedly, to rescue Qin emperor from the clutches of death.

And from then on, every time he charged into battle, his sword would reap carnage through the battlefield.

After he died, the Qin emperor had his people build Cao a magnificent tomb of honour, in the lush green mountains at Phoenix Crossing, where he had saved the emperor’s life. Inside the tomb was room after room of treasure. The most important item of all was of course, the Jade Sword, that was buried in the coffin of Cao Zheng. Many treasure hunters have tried to locate the tomb and retrieve the sword, but none ever came back. It was filled with so many traps that the creators themselves never made it out.

Jacob and Amy the two children of the Famous Zhao explorers, had come across their missing parent’s documents in a dusty attic. Upon opening them, they discovered a map showing the whereabouts of the Mystical Mountain, where the tomb of the Jade Sword was believed to lay.

Jacob and Amy’s parents had gone missing ten years ago on a quest to find the legendary Jade Sword. Now it was their turn to continue the family’s unfinished mission.

Two days after finding the map Jacob and Amy found themselves at the foot of the huge, jagged Magical Mountain. It wasn’t what they had expected.

Shrouded in mist, the pair could barely make out the several peaks that towered above them. The rocks were a deep shade of black and they protruded out of a thick layer of gray dust. There was a surprising lack of life on this mountain. The trees were wilted and bare. There were no signs of life anywhere to be seen. Shadows loomed across this deathly landscape.

They knew this was going to be a difficult journey up hill, but it was the thought of their parents passing away somewhere on those rocky ledges above them that spurred them on. Step by step, the two clawed their way up the mountain path, cutting their hands and knees on sharp rocks as they clambered through narrow ravines, wrestled with the remnants of the forest that once lay there, but now only presented knife-like spikes, that would pierce your flesh, like a needle through a cloth.

After a day of climbing, the exhausted duo were ready to collapse. Their feet were throbbing, their muscles were tightening and their morale was sinking, when Jacob Stumbled across two giant-sized lion statues on either side of a stone entrance. Chinese characters were engraved all around this unusual doorway. Above it, read Cao Zheng’s name. On either side of the gate were less typical characters that were once used by a secret sect of monks, known to place curses on those who went against them. They read, those that disturb the crypt of Cao Zheng will be followed with a lifetime of unfortunate events. Jacob gave himself a pep talk and the two went in.

They were on their third stair down when the door slid shut behind them with a muted click.

“Guess we ain’t going out the same way we came in.” Jacob said, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!” the torches on the sides of the stair—case lit up, casting shadows on the walls and floor. They danced and whooped like ghosts and demons...

When the two finally made it down the flight of stairs, they reached a crossing. In the middle was a key, and there were three locked doors. The path on the left led to a room labeled “wealth and riches”. The one on the right was labeled “Exit” and had a warning, saying last chance and the one in the middle had nothing on it, except for the carving of two dragons on each side of the door and a massive pearl key hole in the middle. With out hesitation Jacob stepped forward, stuck the key in the keyhole and twisted. But as soon as he did, a hissing sound started and ghastly green fumes started spewing out from all corners of the room. They rushed forward holding their breath and with all their might, smash their bodies against the unbudging stone door. As the door gave way the two collapsed on the ground, breathless with their heads spinning. When they looked up, amoeba danced in front of their eyes, but when they cleared, they looked up and were shocked to discover they were in an imperial chamber, with twenty bronze warrior statues staring towards them. In amongst the statues lay the remains of numerous humans, that appeared to show brutal wounds, suffered from sharp and blunt traumas. Broken bones, and smashed skulls adorned the path to a golden tomb.

Jacob and Amy where scared and confused. “What happened here?” Amy whimpered to Jacob. Jacob replied in a shaky voice “I don’t know, but it doesn’t look good.” As Jacob put one tentative foot forwards, the door behind them slid close behind them. They could hear the sound of mechanisms grinding together. Then the most horrifying thing of all happened, The statues were coming to life! As they moved Dust and dirt cracked and fell creating a sand—storm, after they could see again, they found that under the muddy brown coat, was a bronze warrior armed to the teeth. They charged and Amy let out a shriek of horror. Without hesitation Jacob slung Amy across his shoulder and started the hundred—meter sprint towards the other side of the room, towards the golden coffin. Almost as a natural instinct, he shoved aside the coffin lid using it as a shield, with his other hand he took the Jade sword from Zheng He’s hand and just like that, the Jade sword had been brought into battle once again.

With his sword and shield, Jacob hacked and bashed his way through the bronze warriors, giving a occasional poke in the back for good measure, leaving behind him a pile disassembled amour platings. After he had gone through the very last one.

He turned back and was surprised to see sunlight, the moment he had opened the coffin lid and held the Jade Sword, it was as if he had opened the door of life and sliced apart the chain locking it with his Jade Sword. Outside birds chirped, leaves rustled, and the stream rushed down the mountain. A crevice appeared in the wall beside them and as they climbed out, the most amazing thing happened, out of the glimmering sun light, appeared their mother and father. The leaves crunched beneath their feet as members from the Zhao family flew into each other’s arms in a tight embrace. And the happy family was once again united.

It was one month later when Jacob and Amy were alone at the museum admiring the Jade sword behind a sheet of bulletproof glass in the china’s top artifacts section. This exhibition wasn’t set in just any old museum, it is set in the famous resting place of emperor Qin. The sword’s glass case was next to a few others, those held impressive bronze and terracotta warriors, suddenly there was a crash behind them and when they looked back what they saw made their jaw drop open and eyes widen in recognition and horror. The bronze warriors had hacked the glass apart with their swords and were making their way up behind them sword raised above their heads. The duo turned and ran screaming.

(This is a piece of fictional writing, all events and characters has come from the author’s imagination and any link to reality is entirely coincidental. This piece of work has been created by Kevin Liu from Wellington College International Shanghai 7E upper prep Hill)

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Luedi, Sophie – 11

Brooke stepped out of the forests, into the plain field on the mountain. She sat down on the seeing stone, and she closed her eyes. Hills. School. Friends. Physics. Exams. Exams. Her eyes sprang open, as she noticed her heartbeat had gone quick. She was sweating, and tears were leaving her eyes, without her noticing. Tests. She suddenly lost the ability to walk, and she felt down to the ground. She then suddenly felt a burst of energy and she could walk. She slowly walked away from the stone. And didn't look back. She looked at her watch. It was 6:00. She needed to go to school now. She needed to go to an exam now.

She put some concealer on, some lipstick on, blush and finally mascara. She was in 7th grade so she could put a little bit of make up on. Although she didn't like it, she did it to hide her emotions.

"When I give you your exam paper, do not turn it around until I tell you to do so. You have 2 hours to complete this exam." The teacher said.

Brooke was panicking now. She could feel the tears generating in her eyes. The watery substance then rolled down her eye. It hit the concealer, which left a dark line on her face. A few more tears rolled down, and soon her mascara was wearing off. The teacher then passed her the test. The teacher signaled that she could turn the test paper over. She looked at the test paper. She wrote down a few equations, but she wasn't sure she was correct. On every question, she had a specific doubt, that her answer was wrong. She looked at the time. Every second was ticking by. Every second she looked at the clock, she was wasting time.

"Times up" the teacher said.

Brooke was suddenly started panicking again. She had at least left 2 questions blank. That meant no 100% for her, and if no 100%, you can't go to Harvard, and if you can't go to Harvard you can't be the best.

"Brooke I need your exam now" The teacher said.

With her hands shaking, Brooke gave the exam to her teacher. The teacher then dismissed her.

Brooke left thinking she did terrible on the test. She didn't know what she would get. Her scenarios filled up her head, with the what if I flunk the test, or the what if I get 100. She decided to just stop thinking about it. She still had the rest of the day of class, but she had no classes she really enjoyed. Her classes were pretty easy, so she didn't have to fully concentrate on them.

The day went by really fast. Without anything to distract her anymore, she could finally enjoy her favorite part of everyday, mountain climbing. She went to her school fence, and she uncovered the hole that's been there for years. Every morning she would hide her climbing gear there, a backpack, ropes, and protective gear. She took her backpack and put it on her back. She then walked to the mountains. China's magical mountains.

No one knew except her that it was a magical mountain. The mountain range had 12 mountains and each of them had something different. One of them had a steep, challenging but fun climbing side that Brooke went to every day. Another one had very nice ski slopes, one had natural hiking paths. To everybody else, they thought ancient civilizations were habited in these places. However, Brooke knew that this was no coincidence. She knew the spirit on the mountain, and she knew the story behind it. The spirit was forced to make these mountains, when the first Pangea was still there. When the spirit was still a woman, death wanted the spirit to marry his son. However when she said no, death tried to kill her. But because of the strong present of good in her, he was only able to turn her into a spirit. As a spirit, lots of her good had disappeared, meaning that death could turn her into a dead person. However, death offered mercy. If she created mountains that were unique, so his son could enjoy them, she could be a spirit forever. She quickly agreed, and she built the mountains. However, when death's son walked on it, he would die. The spirit quickly modified the mountain so they would curse death's son. After his son's death, death realized that

the spirit was more powerful than him, so he decided to flee. Not even now, millions of years later have people discovered where death went. It would just appear, and disappear again. Years later, the mountains still survived, and as the daredevil she was, Brooke decided to check it out. She met the spirit, and had many adventures with her, since she was 6 years old.

Today, she went to the mountains to relieve her depression. She wanted to find the spirit, and she wanted to talk to her about the test, and everything. In other words, the spirit was practically her therapist. Except, with a snap of her hands, she could solve all the problems.

Brooke took her pickaxe out, and she threw it to a high point of the mountain. She had 2, in case one got stuck or some other reason. The pickaxe had a strong rope attached to it, meaning that she wouldn't fall down. After she got all the safety precautions ready, she started climbing the mountain. She calculated that today according to the position of the sun and the angle the sun is facing, she would have to climb 800 meters. She threw her pickaxe about 20 meters, so she would have to throw it 40 times. It wasn't too much, but for a 12 year old that was a lot. However, due to the experience she had, it wasn't that hard. After she climbed the last meter, she saw the spirit meditating on a rock. The spirit had no face, and she was dressed in white robes, and her skin was white she was so pure, light was shining from her skin.

"How did it go?" The spirit asked

"It was ok" Brooke replied

"No it wasn't. You stressed out" The spirit replied

"I messed up 2 questions." Brooke said

"You'll be fine. You will get a 96 in your test." The spirit said

"That's pretty good. That means I get one question wrong." Brooke said

"Yes." The spirit replied. "Brooke. I need your help"

"What do you mean?"

"recently, I have located death, and using my powers I have detected that he now has the power to destroy me" The spirit answered

"That's impossible. You're the spirit of China's magical mountains."

"It is very possible. Have you seen how many people he takes each day? Millions. Babies, teens, adults, children, a lot everyday. I *must* go into hiding. I need you to locate somewhere I can hide."

"Why can't you locate somewhere?"

"The last time I left these mountains it was still the Pangaea. The Pangaea was when the continents you know today were where together. There was the oceans on one side, the other side was land. These mountains, due to my presence was the only thing that hasn't changed. Have you noticed all the mountains around the world? They were never there when I was a human. Every single mountain, river, landscape and sea will disappear one day. Except for these mountains. The Chinese magical mountains will be destroyed if I am gone."

"You have to give me a clue. Do you want to hide in a cave, or what?" Brooke said, annoyed.

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking you."

"Look you can't just hide. We have to fight."

"Well then we should prepare."

The spirit then closed her eyes, and chanted an ancient spell. She suddenly had lots of staff with her. She had sticks made out of pure astatine. Astatine is one of the rarest metals in the world. She then chanted again, and green gases started leaking out of it. Poison. Something even the strongest masks couldn't protect you from. Astatine poison however, was a whole different story. It was made to kill. Like an atomic bomb.

The spirit suddenly sat down on a rock. She was obviously hurt. What was happening? No one knew. Suddenly, a black portal appeared in the sky. Brooke pointed her wand at it, and the poison flew toward it. But something black muffled its way to the portal. It was plain black, not anything else. It was death. As the spirit got worse, Brooke took the spirit's staff, and put them together. The power of the poison got larger and larger. The black material then started to slowly fade away. The green poison started to eat away the portal, until the sky was clear. The spirit suddenly got better. But then they saw something mortifying. Death was dead, but his son was alive.

Mystery Mountain Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Quan, Elizabeth – 11

Long time ago, there was a huge mountain in the east of China, and there are two families on the mountain, they are both rich and they got powerful armies. In the north of the mountain, there is the Changs family, which got a good trade relationship with the nobilities around the king because they do seeing and divination, and there is only a 10 minutes' walk to the palace. And in the east of the mountain, there is the Lees family, which do food trade for the king. As the families both work for the king, they should have a good relationship between, unfortunately, they don't. As for why, the housekeeper of the Changs said, when Chang Ting, the daughter of Chang Chuen was born, the prophecy ball threw a nightmare like prophecy: from the north, there is a man, who got enough power to kill her. Chang Chuen thought that it must be the new born son of the Lees, Lee Hua. This left the two families at a permanent stalemate: no contact, no affinity, no war.

As the time lapses, Lee Hua and Chang Ting became grown-ups, their first met was in the market at the foot of the mountain, Lee Hua was jumped out at Chang Ting's beauty and Lee Hua attracted her for his heroic, they both fell in love with each other, their eyes couldn't leave each other at all the time, the housekeepers of both families discovered that something was going in a wrong track so they carried their masters away from the carnival.

The turning point of this story happened here, the prince took the old king's place to do trade stuffs with the Lees, and the prince fell in love with Chang Ting, but her heart was with Lee Hua's heart. The prince wanted to get engaged to Chang Ting and gave her three days to think and arrange for the wedding. The prince left, Ting started crying, she left her house and went to find Lee Hua, he was really sad, angry and helpless for this thing. They decided to run away from their family, unfortunately, they were caught by the prince who was hunting. He was ashamed with Chang Ting, he wanted to kill her, but he loved her, and the trade relationship will be damaged, he sent them back to their family and wrote letters to the families' leaders, the leaders were both ashamed by them, so they had made a huge battle, the prince heard that the battle happened, he hastily sent 2,000 soldiers to rescue Chang Ting, but the soldiers don't know what does she look like, so they were only doing fighting and killing. And they had killed Lee Hua, Chang Ting was buffeted, she cried, she held his dead body, she cried that heart-wrenchingly, no one answered. She saw with her own eyes his former lover's complexion turn from rosy to pale. She started doing prayers sobbed, the rain cloud accompany lightning joined the battle, the landslide took everyone's life, except for one person.

Today, the mountain is still wet, smoke-filled, and deserted, except for one woman who lives at the foot of it and tells her absurd but touching story.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Shue, Olivia – 11

It was cold here. Dry. At first I didn't want to come, but Ariel had insisted, so I had to. It turned out to be quite nice here, like she had described. She had always wanted to visit this place, but it was dangerous, so she needed someone to come with her. I walked over to her tent. The stunning white snow crunches under my boots. I see her warming her hands over a fire. I take my gloves off and do the same. "So, Anthony, do you want to go for a hike tomorrow?" she asks, "I've heard that these mountains are magical. The mythical creatures will protect us."

"Sure," I reply. It was a good opportunity for me to collect some information about these mountains. I work as a geologist at home. So does Ariel. We're friends. Colleagues. Nothing else. "We're also going to have a professional guide, just in case." She smiles at me. "We leave first thing tomorrow, ok?"

"Alright, see you!" I reply and trudge back to my tent.

The sun shines through the small plastic window on the side of the tent. I sat up and see the beautiful mountains, coated with a thick layer of white snow. After I finish getting ready for the day, I start packing some climbing equipment into a bag. I saw Ariel waiting for me at the main tent, so I quickly finish packing and trudge over to her. She was standing there, next to two men. She promptly introduces me to them. "This is Daniel Roberts, our guide. He's a professional climber, she says, "and this is Mr. Meng. He's been living here for more than 20 years."

"You can call me Bill," he tells us. With that, we set off.

The sun was cold and bright in the sky. I had my studded climbing boots on and I strode across the snowy ground. "Need any water?" Ariel asks.

"No, it's alright, I have some in my pack!" I shout back.

"Tell me if you need any more!" she responds.

We soon arrive at a steep slope. Our studded shoes help with climbing up. Daniel went first, with the help of his ice pick. Ariel was prepared to climb and was halfway up the slope when we hear a deafening "BANG!" For a second, it seemed like time had frozen, and everything around me was still. Motionless. Then the world comes back to life and I find myself standing inside my house back home in California. I hear the comforting crackle of the fireplace and suddenly I find myself on the ground, in the snow. I see the others not far away from me. I whip my head around and see the base camp, down below us, a burning wasteland. Something must have exploded. I'm so thankful that we decided to go climbing today and not some other day. In the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of a bird, a huge, fiery one. The base camp immediately stops burning, even though it is still blackened and scorched. I gasp. I run over to Ariel and quickly helped her up. No point in going back to the base camp now. "There are other camps further up the mountain. I think, if we can make it to the next camp, we should be fine. The next one is about 800m above us," says Bill. Good. With Ariel injured, I'm not sure we'd be able to make it any further. I sigh and start climbing again.

We hike up one slope after another. Ariel follows behind us, limping. It's around 4 right now, and we still haven't eaten lunch. I grab a couple of crackers out of my bag and start eating. "Are we close yet?" I ask.

"Sort of, we should arrive by nightfall," says Daniel.

“When we get there, they’ll call a helicopter,” says Bill, and they’ll take you into the city, where there are a lot of hotels.”

“ Sure,” I reply, “and I’ll take Ariel to the hospital.”

Bill spots a cave where we could have a short respite from the climbing. We sit down in the snow outside the cave. I hear a grunting sound, but I just ignore it. Suddenly, a huge head pops out of the mouth of the cave. Not just any head, a dragon head. I’d only seen these beasts in fairytales and myths. I was so surprised that I jerked my arm back in alarm and dropped my lunch. Even more shocking, it actually started speaking. Not in English though, in Chinese. It had a deep voice and little flames came out of its mouth as it spoke. “My master is inside the cave, and he is sick of this place. If you can help me find him a new home, I will grant you one wish.” translates Bill. Daniel immediately pushes Bill out of the way and hollers, “You’re just a dragon! What can you do?” The dragon’s eyes abruptly become fiery and unkind, and smoke starts coming out of his nostrils.

“Stop!” Shouts Bill, “You don’t know what he can do!”

A thought springs into my mind. The charred, blackened base camp— a perfect home for a dragon. He would be perfectly camouflaged there. “No. Tell him about the base camp. I’ll tell him what our wish is.” I murmur.

Bill translates everything into Chinese. The dragon nods in satisfaction. He flies back into the cave and comes out with his master, an enormous dragon nearly double his size. Its scales were as black as the night sky and its claws sharp like a knife. The servant dragon leads its master in the direction of the base camp, and it flies off itself, leaving a black trail behind. Then, I see the great, fiery bird again. A Phoenix. The servant dragon flies back. He mumbles something in Chinese, and Bill translates it for us. “He says that he is very grateful that we told him about the base camp. He will now grant us one wish.”

“Tell him to revive all the people who were at the base camp during the explosion,” I say. Send them back to their homes and leave them a note telling them what has happened.” Before the others can stop us, Bill has already translated the sentence. The dragon looks us all in the eye and grants my wish. Right before we are about to leave, the master Dragon comes back. “It seems like some of you are disappointed,” Bill translates, “why is that so?”

“Could you please take us to the camp above us?” I say.

“Your wish has been granted.” The great dragon bows down and signals us to hop onto his back. He takes off and we are soaring through the clouds, watching the last speck of sunshine disappear from the sky. Minutes later, he lands in the trees, around 30 metres away from the camp. We get off, refreshed. We half lead, half carry Ariel to the camp. A small lady comes and leads us to a helicopter. We say goodbye to Daniel and Bill and walk into it. The driver puts on some headphones and takes off. We watch the snowy terrain below us turn green and lively as we depart the mountains.

The next day, I’m sitting in a hotel room. I turn on the television and switch to the news channel. I see two familiar faces looking at us— Bill and Daniel. They must’ve reached the summit. I turn off the television and walk downstairs. I smile. I call a taxi and I’m on my way to visit Ariel. I want her to see this. This little adventure between us, how it lead to something much, much bigger.

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Su, Rundi – 12

A peak shrouded in a perhaps cursed mist, so beautiful yet so hideous. A peak containing perhaps enough treasures to keep a man wealthy for generations. A peak where tremendous forces of nature and perhaps the will of the Jade Emperor himself finds manifestation. The gate to eternal secrets, and those who control it may wield more power than the gods might ever possess. Maybe that is the reason why its mysteries will never be probed. But, the determination of those who do will burn bright like a flame, and will never ever be extinguished.

In the holy realm of Terra, the most magnificent creation of the Jade Emperor, civilization flares bright as development pushes the limit of mankind again and again. Mighty offerings and endless sacrifices bloody the altar of the temple. Faith to the gods spur men and women to raise great monuments in praise to the glory of the Emperor. Though disaster and war have pushed us to the brink of extinction time and time again, nothing can ever shatter our soul. We recover from our wounds and forge even greater creations than the past. Through disaster we unify and become much more powerful than we ever might before. Eternal glory beckons to us.

But fate is cruel, and shall not stop in its campaign that craves our destruction. Our intellect grew, but savagery followed its footsteps, in turn to be exploited by the misguided or the evil. We were obliterated in a storm of heresy and blood, people in their thousands being massacred and hundreds of settlements being annihilated, their populations being twisted beyond recognition. Disease followed in the aftermath, bring death to those who had managed to withstand such a tragedy. Survivors quickly descended into conflict, a losing struggle for resources. Once a land of peace and prosperity was torn apart by war and death. The Jade Emperor, instead of utilizing his infinite and supreme power to help, instead turned away in disgust, retreating to the Sky Palace with his servants, where they will be shielded from the blasphemy. Terra had been abandoned by its most divine protectors, the state of China and the empire of Rome plunged into never-ending strife. It seemed all hope was eradicated, replaced by dissension and demise.

An escalating rumor told of an ancient artefact that was fabricated at the dawn of time, blessed by the stars and the moon. A sacred codex, preserved using means that the mortal may never comprehend. The only object that may bring enlightenment to a world on the verge of being consumed by chaos. Hope reborn in such a time of darkness. Yet it was the difficulty of claiming such an immense antiquity that brought demise on optimism it aspired, for it rested on the one place the sublunary cannot possibly access. Such a place was the Peaks of Discipline, a gathering of colossal sanctified might, a district where the residents of Terra ascend to godhood through thousands of centuries of meditation, so that only the most holy are to remain from the erosion of time.

Though the consequence for the acquisition of this relic is dire, its protector spirits bent on the extermination of anyone who dares to even hint to claim it, none of these can possibly contest the horrors that await the wielder when they finally reach triumph, only for them to be torn apart by the epic power the codex had harnessed when it was contrived in the Sky Forge, as a last resort to the trepidation that may shatter reality at last. Deemed to intense even for the Jade Emperor, it was sealed away forever on the Peaks of Discipline, an unimaginable spell cast by the Four Lords of The Sky, a feat that siphoned away fully half of their power. Terra shuddered at the curse, raw magic roving across the war-torn lands in form of hurricanes that ignores any form of physics and science. The catastrophic era that followed the Demonization of Discipline brought the terrors of destruction to Terra, in a period known as the Maelstrom of Strife. Serving as a painful reminder of the divine power being misused, Terra attempted to forget. Now, for a realm drowning in darkness and horror, it has entered its hour of need at last.

The Emperor of China debated the issue behind the magnificent doors of the Imperial Palace of Luoyang, the greatest Chinese settlement of all time. In a vision he was revealed the godly power of the Codex. He saw fresh hope, the seeds of restoration being planted, a chance to bring back order to a world now plagued by conflict and tyranny. A chance for hope to be reinstated back to a world suffocating in the grip of violence and brutality. Thus, began the crusades of Eternal Rehabilitation, the greatest quest of history.

Many will perish and degenerate in that strange and sadistic place, but ultimately more will fall to the spirit of the mist, vengeful and drunk on the will of extirpating any intruder that dares to undertake that ground. The crusade forces have been halved as delinquent bands and hidden dangers tear at the ranks of the crusaders. What almost completely shattered them was the breaking of faith to the Emperor as the sanity of many were finally destroyed, driven to madness by the strange abominations that haunt the shrine of the Codex. Forgotten treasures lie amongst the ruins, prodigies produced to the glory of an age long forgotten. Though greed drove some to claiming those, their decaying bodies serving as a reminder to others who let that cursed thought cross their minds. It seemed everything here has been tainted by the Devil's hand, spreading corruption to every particle.

At long last, braving dangers beyond count and hardships beyond number, did the surviving number, now reduced to a mere handful, sight the peaks. Wonders of nature and just a demonstration of the powers of the Jade Emperor, they rose high into the clouds, their peaks shrouded in the golden mist siphoned from the souls of those who failed to pass the test. Unmistakably was a faint sliver glow, forbidding in nature. Perhaps, the silver of restriction was surrounding them and whispering their lust and seeking to devour their souls. Perhaps they will only fall to what has felled many before, just another page in the endless history that has spelled doom for many, all seeking one goal, perhaps out of their reach forever. These did not matter. These cannot matter. Their only quest is to claim the codex, and if they perhaps will be made a martyr in the struggle only the gods will know. They will execute their mission, perhaps entrusted to them by fate or someone much bigger than even the mightiest entity ever created.

At long last, the two last members of crusaders stepped into an extensive valley enveloped in a dazzling light, blinding them momentarily. The Codex lay just a few meters in front of them, a distance so small compared with what they had to endure. A beam of pure energy emitted from the Codex, illuminating the corpses of those less fortunate for their fate and piercing the night above. A faint humming surrounded the gorge, but was accompanied by only an eerie silence, an atmosphere of death sheathing the area. But their task is done; all that is left is to claim it and wait for their judgement.

Breathing hard, they stepped forward as fear continues to erode their courage. One of them reaches out and touches the surface. A hard, leathery material once formed the relic, but was withered by time. He puts his hand around it and brings it to his chest.

A blinding flash lights up the dark sky and a golden ring forms as the Codex begins to erupt in a cyclone of raw magic, deforming rapidly as the ring expands and fills the sky. Across Terra, new life grows and blooms as the blood from the endless slaughter disintegrate into a red mist. The devastation is replaced by the once prosperous structures of the glorious age mankind had. At long last, a hint of smile crossed the emperor's face as the burden was finally lifted from his shoulders.

The two last members did not witness this, however. Centuries later, when this area was finally mapped, they saw the decaying bodies, dead from pure exhaustion. The Crusade ended in victory, but at a terrible cost, though it is certain the sacrifices they had made will not be forgotten.

Terra may have suffered the most grotesque fates before, but both the body and the soul of this realm will recover. Perhaps this was just another test, but no matter what, our resilience and intellectuality should carry us through tragedies untold, past and present. Fate will exam us again, but through the bravery and determination of many, a new sunrise will dawn over us

The Tale of the Pin Point Peaks

Wellington College International Shanghai, Tittmann, Eloise – 11

I ran home from school feeling really happy, I had aced my test. As I climbed up the narrow steps to my house I thought about the fact that tomorrow was my birthday. I was turning thirteen! When I finally reached the peak of the mountain I looked up at the view. I could see dozens of mountains and trees on the horizon, barely visible beneath the clouds. My house sat on top of a mountain, it was small and cozy, surrounded by flowers and trees. I lived with my father and my two siblings. My mother had died only a few years after I was born, she was very sick, and I do not remember her well. As I thought of her I suddenly remembered she had left me a box. She told my father to let me open it when I had turned thirteen. I hoped that the box would help me get to know her better. I loved my family dearly, but it still felt like something was missing.

I woke up feeling refreshed and excited, “It’s my birthday!” I shouted, springing out of bed. I ran downstairs to the kitchen and saw my father making me a special breakfast. “This smells scrumptious, thank you Baba.”

Then I saw the box, it was a beautiful cedar box, embellished with jade details and my mother’s initials intricately etched on top. Father saw me looking at it “open it, Ling Ling,” he said.

“Ok,” I replied.

I carefully took the lid off, inside I saw a letter. It said ‘Dear Ling Ling, Happy Birthday. I am sorry I am not here with you on this special day. In this box there is a map, follow the map precisely and you will find something amazing. Love, your Mama.’ “What could it be Baba?” My father just shrugged.

The next day I started my voyage, I knew it was going to be long so I prepared well. I woke up very early after a long night of sleep and started traveling. I had insisted that my father stayed with my siblings and take care of them. When I got down to the village, people asked me where I was going as they saw the large rucksack. I just shrugged and said somewhere amazing.

It was almost nightfall and I had already been walking all day, and I was tired. My toes were numb in my shoes and my legs felt like noodles. I looked at the map and noticed I still had a long way to go. I sat down and munched on an apple. After that I lay out my blanket and went to sleep with the moon pouring its blue light on the soft grass. Strangely there was no wind that night, there were no mountain bears so I had nothing to fear.

The next morning, I woke up to the disorientating sway of a carriage. I was incredibly confused and searched for who was driving it. I did not recognise the man. I could only see his back, he was wearing a long black cloak and he had greasy dirty hair. I started to panic. “Who are you? Let me out!” I screamed, hoping someone would hear me.

“A little girl like you shouldn’t be out alone,” his raspy voice travelling through the carriage reaching my petrified ears. With trembling hands, I rattled the door of the cab and to my relief it swung open. ‘This guy is a terrible kidnapper’, I thought to myself. I rummaged around and found my bag in a pile of rusty tools. I prepared to jump out of the carriage a few seconds later I jumped. As the carriage was going quite slowly it was very easy to jump out.

I ran a little bit to make sure I lost the carriage, I calmed down and started to walk. I kept hearing the sound of a carriage rattling behind me but it was never there. I took out the map and realised I was on the wrong side of the forest because there was a village. I was thinking about asking someone but after this morning I decided not to. The forest was beautiful, it had vibrant marigolds and dainty little daisies. The leaves dancing in the wind, their rustling is their music. As I came to the edge of the forest I snapped back to reality. “Focus Ling Ling,” I said to myself.

I walked until I finally found the river I was supposed to follow. By then it was already sunset, I decided that tonight I would only sleep a little. I found a small cave and settled there, I stayed awake for a few hours listening to the sounds of the night. I heard the owls and the wings of the bats. I could see the moths attracted to the little bits of moon light. When the moon light hit the river, it was beautiful.

I woke up at sunrise and was glad I did, this was the most beautiful sunrise I had ever seen. The sky was all types of colours; there was pink, purple, yellow, blue and orange. It was magnificent. I could tell it was going to be a good day.

I followed the river along until it flowed into a pool of water. Reflected in the water was the final mountain I had to climb. I gasped. With renewed enthusiasm, I pulled myself up the mountains. I took no care of the branches lashed my cheeks and the thorns at my ankles. Finally, I got to the top, the peaks looked like a line of soldiers watching over me. I thought that this must be what my mother was talking about, and it was the best birthday present I could ever receive. I felt as if I was with my mother when I was looking out at the horizon. I knew that she had experienced this before and it felt like the hole in my heart was slowly being filled.

When I returned my father asked me what it was like, I just smiled and threw myself into his arms. I was crying happy tears, and so was he.

The Story of Yan Feng

Wellington College International Shanghai, Upton–Zhao, Braden – 13

Under the peaceful sunshine lay the village of Yun on the riverbank. An ancient path surrounded the village, and the pale river of Chang was known as the river of the god of rain. For hundreds of years, newly born babies have been taken to this river for the blessing of the god of rain. There was a well-grown forest nearby where all the material for architecture and craft-building came from. The fields beside the houses were mainly covered by herbs and rice. The herbs were the only source of traditional medicine that citizens of Yun relied on. The recipe for medicine was left and inherited by the original founder of Yun. He was an herbalist. Quite a renowned one. Rice is the main course for the citizens of Yun. They cannot live without these two crops.

One day, the mayor ran panting, gasping for breath. He had his eyes open wide, trying to remain steady out of fright, leaning against the tree. It was clear that he could barely stand, as if his legs were full of lead. He announced to the crowd who had just gathered around, with a frown, in the loudest voice he could speak in, “citizens, there is big trouble!” he cried, and carried on, “the god of rain has been enraged, deciding to pour massive rain down into Chang! We are in danger... according to the speed of pouring rain, an unstoppable flood will hit our village. It will hit all of us... and...” The mayor paused, looking desperate and helpless. Melancholy surrounded by the crowds of villagers like how heavy murky clouds obscure the bright, shiny sun.

Suddenly, an 18-year-old teenager jumped out of the crowd, breaking contemplating citizens’ silence. “I have heard about the old myth of the Pearl of Water. In the myth, it explains that the pearl was created by the old man who was famous for water-related studies, but then disappeared mysteriously into the unknown world forever. The pearl was a secret invention of his, it could make all the water in an area evaporate instantaneously. Apparently, people gave hypotheses of where he eventually went, and some said that he took the pearl with him then settled on the summit of Kunlun Mountain...” the teenager took a deep breath, then suggested, “I mean... I can volunteer to give it a try to Kunlun. It’s the only solution now, isn’t it?” The crowd fell into meaningful thinking again. “How about this...” the mayor said, “If you have faith in making your way there and back before the flood arrives... then... go for it...” the mayor sighed, unwillingly putting a young teenager under such danger, risking his life. However, it was the village’s only chance. They had to grab it. The teenager finally introduced, “My name is Yan Feng”

The next day, in the early morning, before the rooster contributed to the Dawn Chorus, before the sun peeked its head over the horizon, in the chilliness of the wind and the thin mist over the river Chang, Yan Feng embarked on the long and threatening journey to Kunlun.

After two hours of tiring hiking along the path leading to the highest mountain range in China, Yan Feng arrived at the bottom of Kunlun. He narrowed his eyes a little and looked up to the summit of Kunlun, “Wow, how tall is that?”, looking amazed by the power of mother nature. He placed his hands on his waist, trying to rest against the power created by it. Regardless of the freezing temperature of Kunlun, he was still sweating all over. His hair was wet as if he had been in a rainstorm, and his shirt was sticky inside. He carried a heavy rucksack on top of his back which contained nourishment, sufficient water, a sword as a weapon, and tools to climb Kunlun with. Yan Feng then carried on climbing.

Days past, the spectacular view of the mountain range gradually became larger and larger in Yan Feng’s eyes as he got higher up the towering mountain of Kunlun. The smoke-like clouds drifted slowly beneath Yan Feng’s feet little by little. The rare pines that grew on the frightening cliffs stood upright. The dark green colour of the pines reminded Yan Feng of the environment back down underneath Kunlun. The burning sun cast a rosy hue onto Yan Feng’s hand, and warmth filled the atmosphere as the sun rose.

Days later, Yan Feng finally saw the summit of Kunlun in front of him, he protectively gripped his tool on to the cliff of the summit then cautiously climbed up the rough rope dangling down from the precipice. The wind howled like a fierce and violent monster, and the frosty flows of wind sliced Yan Feng’s face as sharp as aggressive knives and

shooting arrows. The snow blocked Yan Feng's sight and suddenly, the hook that had been attached to the cliff wobbled. Yan Feng frowned fearfully and looked up at the cliff. All he saw was a hook that was struggling to hang on to the last piece of rock by the edge of the summit. The wind got stronger. The hook finally lost its balance and fell off the cliff. Yan Feng's mind was empty, feeling powerless and vulnerable after all the life-threatening climbing he did. He fell from the cliff miserably. Seconds past. Yan Feng sensed a massive pain that came from his back, and he turned around his body, finding himself landed on a narrow piece of platform naturally created that branched out from the side of Kunlun. "Few!" Yan Feng said with relief, then climbed extra-carefully back onto the peak of Kunlun with his nasty injuries.

"I finally arrived!" Yan Feng shouted with victory. Tears filled his eyes and dropped out of his eyelids. His cheeks were as red as tempering steel, his legs were shivering, and his hands were numb and swollen. A cave was revealed behind the highest layer of clouds, and a stooping old man walked out patiently with his crutch. "Hello!" Yan Feng greeted him with a friendly smile. The old man was bald and had a long white beard that typically all old men had. His eyebrows were wide and thick, and he said with an indistinct tone, "So... what are you here for? I have not seen any fellow human beings since... um... three hundred years ago." He seemed precise and confident with his calculation. Yan Feng answered, "I have heard about the Pearl of Water in the traditional myth that had been passed on through every generation. I am here today to save our village – Yun. It is in immense danger of flooding and this is the only way that our village could be saved! Hundreds and thousands of people live in Yun, and... it is just overwhelming to talk about... or even to think about what would happen if I didn't return with the Pearl of Water to save Yun from the tragedy of flooding..." Yan Feng said with a fearful look. "Look," the old man said, "I can give you the Pearl of Water, but..." the old man thought for a while, then carried on, "But you will have to give me your life as an exchange to extend my lifetime." The old man said seriously. Yan Feng was shocked. He could not believe how terribly filthy the man's heart was. However, Yan Feng still had the whole village waiting behind him for the victorious moment of him saving everyone from this unexpected, disastrous catastrophe. Tears fell from Yan Feng's eyes again, and he said with a trembling voice, "Yes, I consent your request." The old man nodded and gave Yan Feng the Pearl of Water without hesitating. Yan Feng took the pearl fearfully, seeing it as the most precious treasure in the world. "Thank you." Yan Feng said politely, then returned to Yun.

Down at Yun, the hills and the forest looked familiar. The rain was still pouring down, creating a damp, humid environment. Things were sticky, and the tree barks were already sloppy and gooey as if they were going to fall off at any time. The trees were filled with fungus and moss and vines climbed all over plants and houses. The crops were wilted because of excessive rainfall. Citizens of Yun looked desperate and vulnerable. Yan Feng ran as fast as he could down the hill path leading to the village. He held the Pearl of Water in his palms and took a deep breath. He took one last look at Yun, the place where he grew up over the past 18 years. He looked around for the last time, at the houses, the shops, and the fields. Memories started to fly back through his mind. The scenes of him running along the main street in Yun, playing with his best friends; the scenes of him in the fields harvesting the crops with his parents and all the happiest memories came back into his head. "Goodbye, Yun" Yan Feng shouted with tears, and he threw the Pearl of Water into the river of Chang.

Golden lights immediately came sparkling out of the river. The dark heavy clouds dispersed, and strips of warm, harmonious sunlight shot through the fissure in between the two big clumps of murky clouds. The bright blue sky was revealed behind the depressing weather of storms. The crops magically reemerged stronger, and the trees and houses recovered from the damp conditions. Yan Feng gradually floated and rose from the ground, facing the sky. Citizens gathered around to see this incredible and historical moment. Yan Feng's body grew fluffy white wings. They moved and carried him up into the sky, above the clouds, and all the way until villagers lost sight of him into the mighty world hidden above the sky...

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Valdez, Ailani Tomasz – 12

I ran. My eyes had only just started to adjust to the darkness. The alarm went off. They were looking for me. I ran up a small rocky hill. I saw lights turn on from inside the building. Lots of kids had woken up because of me. The matron was calling my name trying to find me. “Kate, KATE, WHERE ARE YOU!? COME HERE RIGHT NOW!” She looked out the window and saw me. “ KATE GET BACK INSIDE RIGHT NOW, WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE!?” I ran faster than I had ever before! Two strong guards chased me with whips. I climbed up a tree. They stared at me. They didn’t know how to climb! I jumped up to the tallest branch and threw myself to the tree next to it. I kept doing this until the guards gave up and walked away. Then I jumped out of the tree and landed in a pile of yellow leaves. Then I thought “I have lost everything, my bed, food, shelter, what am I going to do now?” A noise broke my thoughts. I thought this noise was from a thing called an animal. I had read about these creatures in the old broken down library I had loved to visit. I followed the noise. It brought me to a small cliff with a waterfall gushing down onto the ground. I emerged out of the yellow leaved bushes and saw an animal howling into the horizon. I walked up to it. It growled showing its teeth. They were as white as pearls in the sea and they were as sharp as knives. I inspected it. It was a teenage wolf but it didn’t seem old enough to hunt without his pack and parents. I looked around. He was lonely. It had looked like it had been in a fight. He had a scar across his eye and he had a scratch on his back which was bleeding. His looked like it had been bitten and his ear was half chopped off. He looked in a lot of pain. I sat next to him. He didn’t bite me, instead he just curled into a tight ball and whimpered. I felt bad for it. It looked like he was lonely like me. I stood up. “I will take you somewhere to help with your wounds follow me”. Weirdly the wolf understood and got up and followed me. “And one more thing I’m going to call you Scar!” I said and we began walking.

We had walked for 3 hours! The whole time we were looking for shelter but we couldn’t find any! It was like humans don’t even exist! That’s when Scar’s ears went up. I followed his eyes. It led me to a small hut with smoke as grey as pebbles. Scar put his tongue out. He smelled something. A few seconds later I smelt it to! It was fresh apple pie. The smell reminded me about how hungry I was. Scar and I ran to the little cottage. We heard humming from the inside, it sounded like an old woman. All of a sudden the door opened. “ Aaaa Kate I have been expecting you, and you too Scar.” An old woman a bit taller than me looked down at us. She had long grey hair and light blue eyes. She stood there smiling at us. I was speechless. “ H...How do you know my name? And W...who are you?” I asked her. I had so many questions I thought that my brain was going to explode! “Ah Kate when you get older you will understand, but now you are still young like a bird leaving its nest for the first time. You mustn’t worry...” she replied. “Come in come in, there is plenty of food for everyone!” We walked inside. There were old pictures of her and her friends playing a type of sport, there was a sofa an old tv and a small round wooden table. I sat down on a chair, and Scar did to. The old woman went to her small kitchen then came back with a big appetizing apple pie. I began to drool! “ Eat up you two you don’t want to be tired tomorrow remember, it’s the big day! You must defeat the dragon.” I wasn’t paying attention I just grabbed a slice and ate it so quickly that you could hardly know it was even there! After I had finished eating I started to process what she had said a few minutes ago... I asked her to repeat herself. “A dragon, what dragon! What’s happening tomorrow, CAN YOU PLEASE EXPLAIN!” She looked at me then sighed “ Ok let me tell you a story that happened a few years ago. Once upon a time Your parents were going on with daily life when something happened. The king had wanted power, more power than he already had. He wanted elemental powers! He asked his guards to bring him any person with a power, then he would ask if they would willingly give him their power. If they said yes they would be free with return with lots and lots of money but if they denied then they would be killed. Now the only two people in the village that had these elemental powers were you parents! But they didn’t want to give their powers away they wanted you to have them. So they left you in an orphanage and ran up a tall volcano guarded by an evil dragon. The dragon would only let them pass if they gave their life’s to him after they put the elemental powers away in a special chest only you can open. He would also guard the chest. Your parents agreed. Tomorrow is when the dragon is weakest you must kill it then! Tomorrow at 6:00

you must venture with Scar to the volcano and fulfil the prophesy.” I was speechless and stared at her. I looked at her for about 1 minute then finally said something. “ Ok I have got to get ready. Do you have anything I could use?” I wasn’t really sure what I was saying, but I would do anything for my parents and if this was something my parents wanted to happen then I must do it. Then I started thinking “ Why should I believe an old women that I have only met a few minutes ago?” I felt this weird connection with her. It was like she was part of me. She gave me a backpack. Inside there was an apple, a map and an old ancient sword. I gasped. It had two tigers Incarved into it on the sides . They were holding stars in their mouth. At the middle part of the sword it had a picture of my parents. I looked at it. It was the most beautiful I had ever seen. “How did you get this?” I asked “Magic” She replied. I looked at her confused but didn’t say anything. It was turning to night. She told us to go to bed. She lead us to a room. Inside there were two cozy beds with blankets as blue as the sea. I lied down on one of the beds. It was soft as clouds and make me feel extremely comfortable! She turned the lights off “Wait” I said. “Yes?” She replied “what’s your name?” I asked her. “Call me Sky” she replied. “And one more thing, Sky, thanks, thanks for everything.” I told her. She smiled and said “Your welcome Kate, goodnight!” And with that she walked out the room and closed the door.

Mountain of Worship

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wang, Midas – 11

The great temple on the top of the mountain; a place to relax and feel the energy flowing around you. It is said that everyone's hopes and dreams happen on the very tip of the mountain. Once a year, people sacrifice valuables in order to be granted luck and wealth.

Long ago, a city lies on slope of the mountain, they had everything they need there to live for centuries. People occasionally run around the mountain to stay healthy but a young boy decided to climb up the mound of earth and was amazed at what he saw: a shrine decorated with jewels all around. He thought if he places something on the shrine, something would happen.

A few days had passed and the boy was thinking of what he can do. He put apples, food and everything he carried, and at last he placed some coins in the shrine, sighing with no hope, but this time he was granted a wish, he wished for wealth for his family and to forever be safe and lived a long happy life.

1000 years later, the mound of earth still remains with the city long gone, it has grown almost 10 times taller and also started growing cracks all over. And no one has yet to discover the history of this enormous mountain, but one day, the light found its way through the cracks, and broke through revealing what lies underneath.

Over 10 years laying undetected, a man discovered what the shrine can do and kept it all to himself, he wished for immortality infinite power, but the gods won't accept this wish and punished him for his greed. Many have faced this fate and has scared other greedy people because they don't want to be punished by gods themselves.

To this day, people climb this mountain to worship a structure made from what was once gold and now stone. Monkeys and other types of animals come to this shrine for a visit once and again, and once a year, the whole city climbs the mountain and rests some valuables in the shrine to pay respect to the men of the sky.

The Hanging Garden

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wong, William – 11

From time to time, I often look back at my memories and find it hard to believe I actually went there with him. My grandpa, the only witness, just passed away at the age of eighty-five.

My grandpa was a very wise old man. I never really knew my grandma; she went to heaven when I was a few years old. To my grandpa, that was like dropping a bombshell on his head and left a permanent hole in his heart. However, the twinkle in his eyes was never mistaken.

When my grandpa was little, he lived in a relatively small cottage. It was not much compared to modern dwellings but, it meant everything to him, while he was there. He often liked to tell stories about himself and he especially likes to describe his little, but mystical cottage.

The cottage had stone pathways that split into three. One led to the never-ending water well, another led to the cottage itself and the third one led to the lawn, which was connected to the barn stables and some horse stables. The house had two chimneys that were, seemingly, smoking endlessly.

The little cottage was in the middle of a majestic forest so, countless species of animals often came to visit. There were deer, rabbits, kind foxes that never showed any aggression at home and many more. Some animals that my grandpa saw are now extinct like blue monkeys, yetis, unicorns, flyfants (elephants that can fly), as they used to call them. The list could go on forever.

My great-grandpa was a cabman who worked six days and my great-grandpa was a cow milker. This was not much then but, again, the cottage was just like an utopia to my grandpa's family. My grandpa was called Linju, which means living in the forest in Chinese.

My grandpa was especially fond of horses and loved to ride them. He used to ride horses for weeks exploring the forest and used to compete in horse races with other tribes in the woodland. However, because of his old age and lack of energy and strength to keep up with the horses, he was forced to give up his magical cottage and his life in the woodland to come to live with us.

We now live in the crowded city of London, bursting with people all the time. Grandpa always seemed happy but, sometimes the magical twinkle would fade, and he would look rather blue. My parents and I guessed that he missed the old times. Where he could roam in the forest either on horseback or walking.

Today, FINALLY, was the start of the Christmas holidays and grandpa's sixty-fifth birthday!

My parents and I secretly made a cheesecake while grandpa was having his daily stroll at the park, down the lane. We decided weeks ago that we should go to Huangshan of China for the Christmas holidays which would hopefully cheer grandpa up, so we surprised him with flight tickets alongside the cheesecake!

We packed our bags in the next days and got ready to leave home at 9:00 pm on the day of departure, heading for the airport. My father said it will take us 12 hours by plane to arrive in Shanghai and a few more hours of car ride to Huangshan.

We arrived at Shanghai Pudong International Airport at roughly 5 o'clock in the afternoon. We slept all the way, but grandpa didn't catch much sleep, as he was very excited to get back to his homeland and to his hometown again. From time to time he looked out of the window and ask the stewardess, "How long is the remaining time to touch down?". Finally, we landed on grandpa's homeland! Dad went to pick up the rental car and then we drove all the way to Huangshan. By 10pm we arrived at the hotel situated at the foothill of Huangshan.

We stayed a night at the hotel and early next morning, dad drove us all the way to our hometown, which is located up in the mountain. On the way I saw many weirdly coloured birds, monkeys and natural landmarks like the rainbow geyser that I have not seen before in London Zoo.

We dropped our bags at my uncle's house, and dad said this was where we were going to stay for the rest of our holiday. It was quite a spacious, detached house and was beautifully decorated too. The following day, my parents went to get a nature spa, so they left grandpa and me. We decided to go around and have some fun.

We couldn't choose between archery, horse riding, basic survival knowledge and many more. So, we did everything in turns, until my parents came and took us to dinner. Grandpa was so good at horse riding, that the coach told him to teach us and even the coach learnt something!

The next day, we heard a rumour that there was a secret garden which contained thousands of unknown species and it sounded just like the setting grandpa has been describing in his story telling time. So, we decided to check it out on horseback.

We quietly borrowed two horses from my uncle's stable, and we travelled into the woods. We took enough dried food for two days, and we spent a long time trying to figure out clues that could lead us to the entrance of this magical place. We searched for almost a day and finally grandpa found the mark. He excitedly exclaimed, "I found it! I found it!". I quickly hurried over but, I didn't see it at first. Then grandpa pointed his hand, still quivering excitedly, at it and I saw it immediately. We removed the dirt that covered it and found a pathway just big enough for grandpa and me to squeeze in. We left our horses outside because they were too big to go through the path. When we reached the end of the tunnel, we were engulfed in colour. There were loads of very strangely coloured birds, a unicorn or two, monkeys, etcetera. I could also see something, although I couldn't recognise what it was, at first.

Then I realised how stupid I had been. It was none other than a bigfoot! I gasped loudly; grandpa just chuckled. It was almost 10 feet tall, looking friendly from the distance. Then he quickly disappeared into the haze.

This place was exactly the same as grandpa described before! I even saw a flyfant take off, and it was just like a helicopter, but the blades had a larger surface area which go up and down instead of rotating. It was just like Dumbo! We spent the rest of the day exploring this magical place. With every step I discovered something new. Every animal was different, no matter if it was the colours or the species. They were all friendly animals, but with strangely beautiful colours that I had never seen before, such as baby blue monkeys, zebra print deers, white elephants, dragonflies that sparkle under the sun just like fairies, and many many more. There are also many types of fruits that we could just pick and eat whenever we were hungry. It got dark before we noticed, and it would be too late to return so we found a safe and warm cave to settle in. That night I slept a wonderful night's sleep.

When we woke up, we were no longer at the cave the night we had been in. I bolted up, got out of my sleeping bag, and woke grandpa. It felt like we were only dreaming of those mysterious creatures, and now faced with just trees and rocks. Another strange thing was that we could no longer find the mark and the only choice that we had was to leave. The path we took to come here was blocked because of a landslide so we had to take the dangerous route of the steep mountains. We were galloping past a mountain when the horse reared, and grandpa fell off. He was seriously injured but was still alive. I sped off at full gallop back to the village for help.

Apparently, my parents called 110 and the police were searching for grandpa and me. We arrived at the nature first aid hospital. They tended the wounds while the emergency helicopter came. Mum and dad came and held his hand. We went with him to the hospital and was by his side all the time he was getting revived.

It was a happy ending as the doctors finally rescued him on Christmas Eve as if by magic. The whole family had a truly relieving and amazing Christmas in my uncle's house. Grandpa and I could not stop recalling the details and repeating our excitement several months after we came back to London. I still see it in my dreams from time to time; it was simply magical and so beautiful.

The Mystical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wu, Melody – 12

High up in the clouds

Pole like mountains

Unheard of creatures

Full of mystery

High up in the mountains above a sea of clouds, the shrill cry of a baby reverberated through the gnarled tree branches traveling to the ears of everyone in the mountain. The cry was loudest at a cliff top monastery. Why was the baby there? Nobody knew. How had it got there? Nobody knew. When did it arrive? Nobody knew. Not even the monks of the monastery knew exactly. But what all living creatures of the mountains did know was that he was the son of a dragon. His name was Zi long.

The monks took him in and his childhood at the monastery passed happily. He even attended school in a nearby village named The Village of Phoenixes . At first, his mystical powers were not very obvious. Every body thought it was just the dragons being nice for a change when they let Zi long play with him when he was two. They thought it was just a coincidence when he yelled “DRAGON” and made them do his own bidding and when he was six. They were nervous when he could control all the creatures of the mountain and by his teens he could almost control all elements of the earth. If he wanted to make it rain, it did, and if he wanted a mist to come down, it would. This made the villagers so scared that they kept their children away from him and never let them play with him. Everybody was too scared of him to be able to like him. So to pass time he would play with the forest creatures (because to them he was just like a brother).He learned to meditate with the the under ground bears that are native to the mountains. He also mastered how to swing from branch to branch with the long limbed monkeys and he learned to hunt with the foxes. It of course went without saying that he found his inner dragon with the dragons. But still it was not the same. Animals cannot replace a human friend. So Zi long lived happily, but not without some melancholy.

Until one day Zhang came. That day was just like every other day but every body seemed to get along with each other better than before and even the sun seemed to shine brighter and more merrily than other days . Even Zi long, who had been acting particularly mopey of late, seemed to have straightened his back at least by one millimeter. Then as a silhouette emerged from the trees, everyone looked up and saw a lean teenager with short black hair holding a brown duffel bag smiling at them. He was Zhang.

Zhang brought happiness to the village every day. Within his first week, everyone in the village had received a gift from him . For example, he gave a new sweatshirt to the chief and to the elders he gave each a delicately carved wooden walking stick. He also gave elaborate pieces of silk for the mothers, and thick durable white towels to the fathers. The children, of course were not forgotten; they received toys. He even gave Zi long a gift— friendship. And now, because of Zhang, Zi long was able to hang out with people of the village too. Sometimes once in a while, the villagers would even give Zi long a gift.

Now that Zi long finally had a friend, they did everything together. When Zhang handed out daily groceries Zi long came too. When Zhang planted the crops, Zi long came too. And when Zhang handed out The Villages Daily newspaper, Zi long came too. All was peaceful and joyous until the day of the Battle of the Villages . Every one was preparing for it. First they had to choose who was to represent the village in the battle. Every young teenage boy of 14 had to stand on a wooden stage for approval. Zi long was forbidden to compete because if he went , the winner would be obvious so this time, Zhang was chosen to represent this village.

“ What is the battle of the villages?”asked Zhang.

“You don’t know what the battle of the villages is?” Said Zi long surprised. “Well I never paid much attention to this before but The Battle of the Villages is when two boys from opposing villages fight to the death and the purpose of it is to make the rank of the village higher. Another purpose is to gain more mountain land to fight, farm, or live in. Currently the Sky village has the most land.”

“Ahh I see...” murmured Zhang and he sank into deep thought.

Suddenly a loud voice rang through the crowd “...and the trainer of Zhang is ...drumroll please... Zi long!!!” Everyone in the village cheered.

The schedule of Zhang for the next few days before the battle went like this:

5 ~7:00	training with swords.
7 ~ 7:15	breakfast and give out newspapers
7:15 ~ 13:00	crops
13: 00~ 13:30	lunch
13:30~ 14:30	meditation
14:30~15:00	hand out daily groceries
15:00~ 17:00	spear training
17:00~ 20:00	sell products
20:00 ~ 21:00	practice dueling with all weapons
21:00	sleep

Finally the day of the battle began. Zhang’s village, Phoenix, was fighting Horse which was a rank lower than them. They were to fight to the death. Zhang and the other boy Mo circled each other ,making sudden lunges and inflicting small wounds on each other. They were also fighting on a cliff to make matters worse. After a good 20 minutes, Mo was getting impatient so he dove at Zhang who dodged and then all we could hear was the sound of Mo’s scream getting farther and farther away as he plunged to his death over the side of the mountain .Then Mo’s brother, Ho could not bear the loss of his brother, punched Zhang in guts causing him to slip and follow Mo’s path down the mountain. In anger and grief , Zi long caused the sky to first rain , then lightning followed by thunder. The ground shook, roars of dragons were to be heard, raging plumes of fire shot from the valleys between the mountains , then all went black.

After the sky cleared, everything seemed to be the same as before but the dragon’s son had disappeared into thin air , never to be seen again.Though sometimes every 12 years people might claim to see a solitary dragon flying across the moon.

The Chinese Magic Mountain

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yang, Laurel – 12

In the hundreds of mountains, there is actually a little country inside it, this country is called cloud, it's a very small country but it's really rich, it's also a place that everyone wants to go because this place is very beautiful but many of them want to find it, but in the rate of 10 nine has died. There is also a reason for why everyone wants to go, there is also a very good school that is called "The cloud school". But there is a rule that only boys can go to school and the girls can only stay at home. Because in ancient China people likes boys more than girl, just because of that rule someone break it.....

A girl called Wen Xi (文曦) Who is actually a assassin from another country called the mist, her mission is to kill the emperor of the cloud country. But Wen Xi do not want to do that, but the emperor of mist tell her she must to do that, because Wen Xi has a brother who is sick (her brother is called Wen Bin). If she finish her mission then she will have enough money to cure her brother.

She pretended that she is a writer and also pretend to be a Boy, One day when the pro king around to have a look at how they do, the emperor saw Wen Xi and thinks he is very smart (she is pretending to be a boy now) so the Emperor invited him to the palace to serve him. Now Wen Xi thinks it's a good chance to murder him. Wen Xi has been served him for one month, she thinks it's time to murder him now, so her first try is when no one is beside and the emperor can't see her (she is at the back) she took out her knife, but just at this time, another servant came in, she hidden her knife as quickly as she can.

The second time, she tried to murder him when he is asleep when she pulled out her knife, she stopped, she doesn't want a emperor of a beautiful country to die. On the next day, WenXi was kneeling on the ground, she wants to tell him everything.

"What are you doing on the ground" the emperor said.

"I'm so sorry your majesty, I lied to you." WenXi said

So then WenXi told him every thing, and said "I can tell the mist king that you are already being killed, then I will pick up my brother and mom and come back here."

But wenxi's plan didn't work very well, then king of mist don't believe her but still let her go. WenXi kind of notice that the king don't really believe her, so she packed her family's things and quickly go off with her family.

Magical Mountains Story

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yangoubpour, LiYang – 13

Along time ago in the Chinese ancient times, there was a beautiful woman, a woman with most elegant, dark luxurious hair, a woman carrying the most alluring ocean blue eyes, and has skin soft and white as snow . Any man would crawl on their knees wishing to get a closer glimpse of her beauty. Despite her special features, she in fact was no ordinary girl, she even carries her own deepest, darkest secret that not a single mortal soul knows about.

She has the power to lure men to the urban lake and do anything at her command, yet she never used that power, and she can sing a magical song to enchant others with joy and has a pale white, scaly shimmering tail. Indeed, she was a Chinese magical mountains siren, which were pretty rare back then since they were hunted by humans which made them almost extinct. It was a curse she had to live with for the rest of her immortal life, that fairly disappointed her.

Then one day, she got sick and tired of being a Siren, all because of this...

It was a full moon that night, she was gazing up into the midnight sky, lost into the moons eye and the stars shine, daydreaming about the dark horizon on the mountain.

She heard the crack of a twig. Someone was there. Feeling alarmed, she quickly turned around and hid her tail in the gloomy waters, just to see the dull shadow lurking around her. She was being watched, "By who?" she thought to herself. She then slowly turned around...

To see a woman. Not another man but a woman. Both of them stared deeply into each others eyes in curiosity, and wonder. "Who.. who are you?" the young woman stuttered. Less starteld now, Sirena replies "my name is Sirena, and yes before you ask anymore questions I am the last Siren in China's magical mountain. The woman was in shock that Sirena replied but at the same time in awe of her response. She took a second to reply and said "No way! My grandmother used to tell me stories about the legends of the magical mountains sirens! But I never really believed if it was true, by the way my name is Ming Ling." They gradually started to become more comfortable with one another and told each other stories about themselves, and later on lost track of time since they were so interested with one another's lives. A few moments later, Sirena came up with an idea where the next full moon they meet each other back at this lake where the waters powers are strongest, where then Ming Ling could be a Siren and Sirena a human for one night. They both were extremely excited and waved goodbye, and swore to meet each other again the next full moon.

Sirena and Ming Ling waited patiently for the time to come and finally a few fortnights later the day has arrived. They met each other in the same lake just like they promised. But that night Ming Ling didn't see Sirena there, and she was starting to wonder if she forgot about their planned special night. Shivering, Ming Ling started to worry, "Was she ok, what if something bad happened to her?". All of a sudden, she heard a distant cheer of some angry people. She was curious and wanted to see what all that commotion was about. Her heart skipped a beat, she couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Sirena stuck up to a wooden pole with her hands and tail visiously tied up with no mercy, Sirenas face was covered with anger and fury as if she was going to take down all of them one by one, yet at the same time she looked anxious.

Both panicking desperate for answer before they burn Sirena for being a Siren, since humans despised them having this picture in their mind for being only evil and dangerous. Without warning, a young man jumped out of the crowd and defended Sirena just as they were about to burn her to crisps and swiftly cut her loose within a blink of an eye, and they both disappeared in the mist. The air was filled with confusion, everyone felt the trauma of what they just witnessed. At that time Ming Ling checked her arm and it wrote "meet us at the enchanted Siren lake", and without a doubt she followed the instructions on her arm and left the scene.

It was her! Sirena and the boy! Ming ling bursts into tears of relief and hugged them both tightly. "But how, I thought you couldn't enchant men when your out of water!?" she asked, and at that moment the young man replied

“Hello! I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself to you guys yet, but hello my name is Nicholas and I am a magical mountains nymph. I disguised myself as a young man so people wouldn’t hunt me down since I am actually the last of my kind like you Sirena! In fact I actually knew your sister Opheila before she got hunted down like you. I knew your face looked familiar when u were in trouble! *chuckles* anyways I’ll be on my way now see you guys soon!”. “Well then again thank you for saving me!” Sirena said with gratefulness. “This is why I don’t want to be a Siren people wont accept you for what you are” Sirena shedded a tear of disappointment. “What on earth do you mean! You get to encounter so many magical beings where no single human being might’ve ever met”. Ming Ling encouraged. Sirena thanked her for her support and wished her well.

At the right moment, the sun rose from the north, the gleaming sun rays reflected on the water spreading various colours of joy and relief, the two girls sat beside each other leaning their heads on one another and watched the horizon.

“It’s Me Kiddo”

Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhao, Tiffany – 13

Gracie:

It was the 3rd of November when I first met the man who kept me waiting for him for 5 years...

We were both in HuangShan for a business trip, or so I thought we were. I was walking into a restaurant for a drink after a day of hiking and taking photos for my gallery at the Met back in New York, when a figure bolted right past me and held me by the shoulders. Slightly older than me, He had a strong grip, ash grey eyes, short sleek brown hair brushed back. He was wearing a jumpsuit that you would expect out of a spy or agent film. I was too lost in my thoughts before I realized that he had gripped me tight and kissed me. It was just a few seconds but I could still feel the tingle down my spine. After that, he apologized so quickly, leaving me stunned in shock and ran off, leaving no mark. It was as if he was running away from something, running for his life.

Stanley:

It wasn't part of the plan to kiss that girl in the restaurant but it was the only way I could lose the group of terrorists chasing behind me: hiding in plain sight. It wasn't the first time I had to do such a thing on a mission. As I ran down the hills and roads of the village, I dropped all the accessories on my utility belt down the mountains of HuangShan.

I arrive to my safe house. The doors unlock as the sensors scan my face. When I finish settling down and reporting my status and success to the head quarters of the CIA, I finally have some time to sit down and relax. But just as I grab a book from the shelf, my thoughts float to the girl I kissed today. Her flashing black eyes, chestnut wavy hair and the daft smell of roses on her...

Gracie:

It wasn't until the next day that I met him again. Right as I was in the middle of adjusting my camera, someone grabbed my purse and ran. I kept on running after the thief and shouting for help but no one came. Just as I lost hope of getting it back, I saw the same figure from yesterday, shoving the thief onto the ground and grabbing for the purse.

The police arrives and the thief is under arrest whilst I see the same figure walking towards me with a dashing smile. He raises his eyebrow and my purse then asks "Hey Kiddo, aren't you goin' to thank me for getting this back?". Before I even get a chance to answer, he's dragging me down the street to one of pubs.

Stanley:

I push open the doors of the pub and sit down with the girl on one of the tables. There's a bit of an awkward silence before I break it. "So kiddo, what's your name? I'm Stanley and I work at a museum" I lie. No one can know about my real job. No one. Not even the girl I might've just fallen in love with.

Gracie:

"Gracie" I answer with a smile.

As the pub gets busier, the music gets louder, I let myself relax and lower my guard. We talk for ages, I see the sparkle in his eyes as we talk. The way his eyes shine when he mentions HuangShan...

It's late into the night and Stanley offers to take me back to my Hotel. We walk down the road in silence but not the type of awkward silence like when we first met anymore. It's a comfortable silence that makes you feel warm inside. He takes me by the hand and I don't pull away. The grip of his large hands gives me a safe feeling. We arrive to the hotel and we lock eyes just before we part. I see that shimmer in his eyes again and I lean in for a kiss. We don't let go of each other, we savour the moment and finally let go out of breath.

5 months later in New York

Gracie:

“And that’s a wrap for today everyone, thank you for all the effort you’ve put into this gallery!” I announce to my team as we pack our things. I walk out of my office after telling my assistant to cancel all my plans for the rest of the day and practically run towards Stanley that’s standing outside waiting for me. “happy 5 month anniversary kiddo” he says with a peck on my lips and a bouquet of flowers on his hand.

Stanley:

I pull Grace out of the building and take her to our usual diner: Mike’s. We sit down. “the usual right?” says Mike, without us even needing to tell him.

Just as I see Mike walking back with our food, I hear a loud BANG! outside. Gunshots. Everyone ducks under their tables with terror, I tell Grace to do the same as I pull out my gun from my coat and walk outside the door.

Gracie:

I wonder in bewilderment, terror and confusion all at the same time when I see Stanley with a gun. Where did he get it? Why does he have it? And Why does he need it? These questions take over my thoughts as I kneel under our booth.

Stanley:

“Alright, Pierre, what do you want? Every that has happened between us in the past strictly stays in between us, do not bring other people into this. I thought we had a deal” I say as I raise my gun at him.

“Oh, but no my dear little Stanley Stan Stan. You broke our deal first. In fact, you broke our deal years ago when you killed my brother. Don’t remember? Well how ‘bout I refresh your memory by taking your little girlfriend there. Ei?” answers Pierre with a chilling smirk.

“bring Grace into this and I swear our feud will not end.” I shoot back, as the veins in my fist start to flare up.

“very well, then your other choice would be, give me back that 20 million you took from me, plus your arm and we’re even” Pierre tells me

I have nothing to do but to do as he says because no one can hurt Gracie. No one.

I call the bank to transfer the money to Pierre which alerts the CIA. The Clock’s ticking and I don’t have enough time to run...

When I wake up again, I realize I’m in a hospital and I can’t feel my left arm any more...

Gracie:

The second Stanley wakes up, I start questioning him in worry: “you better explain to me RIGHT NOW about what happened yesterday. Why did you have a gun? Who was that man? And why did he saw your arm off?” My eyes flare up with tears as I ask him, the feeling of betrayal and how he kept secrets from me stabbed me in my heart but even more, the fact that my most beloved person is lying on a bed missing an arm.

Stanley:

I could see the fear and pain in Gracie’s eyes and I cannot ever stand it when she’s in any sort of pain or negative state. So I tell her the truth. Everything. Even my job.

Gracie:

I don’t even know how to react to Stanley’s sudden confession. I take a minute for everything to sink in. I tell Stanley I’m going home even though I’m not while he begs me not to.

Stanley:

The next day, I woke up early and left a note on my bedside for Gracie because I knew she would come. “To the love of my life, Gracie, I know that I’ve lied to you, kept secrets from you but you just have to me trust again this time. I’m going to leave for a long time, I cannot tell you where I’ll be but only that on every 3rd of November each year, I want you to wait for me at HuangShan. I don’t know if you will do as I say, I guess we will only find out until the day we meet” I pack my things and fly to HuangShan where I spent the next 5 years hiding from the world and training with my master.

5 years later—Present

Gracie:

I walk into the restaurant I first met Stanley in, like I've done for the past 4 years on the 3rd of November. I sit around, looking for him, maybe even just a trace of him. But no, I don't find any. Just as my hopes are gone, I walk out of the restaurant. I see him. I see Stanley. I see the figure I've been longing to see for 5 years...

Stanley:

I smile to Gracie when I see her "It's me kiddo, I'm back"...

Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Wellington College International Shanghai, Zhu, Asun – 12

Once upon a distant time, in a mountain valley lived peacefully Sam and his brother, Tom. They passed their days in harmony, unaware of time and change. In this ever-land, the trees stood for millenniums, the flowers blossomed for centuries and the clear blue streams ran for eternity. Nothing seemed to end here, and it's also as if there wasn't a beginning. It was an isolated realm of immortality, where inhabitants lived so innocently and joyously.

"Come on brother, the sun is yet again rising to the sky!" The laughter of Tom broke the tranquil, amicable silence. "Wake up! Another adventure packed day awaits!" Drearly, Sam drags himself out of his bed. He was already quite used to this; it was pretty much every consecutive day that he was woken by the playful cries of his energetic brother at 5am. Surprisingly even in such a world of freedom one cannot even sleep upon their desired schedules.

"I don't understand," Sam groaned, "Why is that I have to perpetually wake up with you at such an early time to do.....absolutely nothing?"

"Time is money, brother. In life you have to use every second efficiently. How is laying in bed being productive at all?" Replied Tom.

"Is that legitimately your worry at this moment? We are living in a land of eternity, brother, we have enough of the time!" Complained Sam, who was gradually getting irritated by Tom's immaturity.

"You never know." Said Tom, trying to hide a satisfied smirk that's starting to reveal. "We might all die tomorrow." Sam retreats the conversation of incompetence, shaking his head in disappointment.

But in the past few days, a feeling of insecurity started to grow inside him regarding his brother's words of annoyance. As if a bad omen, the thought of death, such an askance topic, was forebodingly stuck inside his so innocent mind. It's something he has never experienced, something he didn't want to experience. But he lived in the ever-land, so the promise was that they would've lived without death, isn't it?

But what if they did all die tomorrow?

Another day, another adventure. It has really never changed. Though every single day they did it again and again, it seemed that they never ran out of places to explore and the countless possibilities to encounter. Today, it was The Valley Mountain Walls, where they would dig deep into the mysterious caverns and follow the natural pathways through the mountain. Sam and Tom prepared their baggages, started towards their destination.

They arrived at the mountain leg. Looking up at the peaks, Sam was utterly petrified by the height of it, level with the clouds.

"I am not doing this." Announced Sam. "You know I am afraid of heights, Tom. How can you be so obnoxious?"

"Life is about trying new things." Replied Tom cheekily, "Overcome your fears, brother, and all will be easier." For many years already and many years to come, Sam has been and will be filled with resentment by Tom—so there was nothing abnormal. *Not yet, at least.*

He bit his lips and started up the valley side, weary of every minuscule move he makes. *Step by step, Sam, step by step*, repeated Sam in his head. *You are not the chicken Tom says you are. You can do this.* He felt sweat snaking down his severed back; he felt his heart pounding his ribcage, almost like it would burst right out; he felt his hands shake vigorously, as if he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His fear of heights was always a problem; it wasn't going to go away.

On the other hand, Tom blithely skipped up the steep hill, as if it was just another stroll in the garden. In the realm, he was named 'The Master of Nature'. Since no single natural obstacle could ever oblige him to do something, it was almost like he could manipulate the ways of nature in his favor.

“Hurry up Sam, pick up the pace! If you continue dragging your legs, we wouldn’t even get to the top at sunset! Come on, we have a view to catch!” Urged Tom impatiently. Sam rolled his eyes and kept on hiking.

A few hours past, and they finally reached the apex. Bathed in sweat, gasping for breath, they laid themselves down.

“Argghhh!” Sam groaned at his exhausted muscles and exhilarated lungs. “I am never doing that again! We are legitimately committing suicide! Why did you—”

At the corner of his eyes, Sam caught a glimpse of a somewhat extinct world, extinct of all matter, drowned in ashes and engulfed in statements of death. *Meh, just another hallucination of dreariness*, he thought to himself. Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes and slowly recovered his state of consciousness.

It was real. The sight was soul-crushing, mind-blowing, and quite frankly, morally misleading. An apocalyptic wasteland of some sort, it was. It was as if an exasperating flame was ignited and disintegrated all matters of life into colossal piles of loose ash and dust.

Sam felt his eyes watering. He slowly turned his head around, facing his home. Acres of superfluosity and life. Then he turned his head back around, facing the extraterrestrial. Miles of death and decay. *This is not real*, thought Sam, comforting himself. He could not accept the haunting truth. *This is not real.*

He closed his eyes, desperately wishing this was all a dream.

‘The truth cannot be wished away, Sam, but it could have been prevented.’

No. None, of this, is, real.

‘Stop the immaturity, Sam. The truth cannot be altered!’

Shut up! You are in my head. All of this is in my head!

‘Sam, whatever you think does not matter, it’s what you do that matters.’

This is incredulous! What am I supposed to do?!

‘It is time I to tell you a tale, Sam, one that decided the devastating fate of your world. One of your despicable grandfather.’ The amorphous voice then took a shape of an old oak tree, Its eyes, nose, mouth and ears distinguishable from the bark.

Every bit of matter suddenly disappeared, evaporated out of existence. The everland, the death land, the hill they were standing on—even Tom, who was still recklessly bewildered as to what was going on. It was just Sam and the Old Oak Tree, in a vast room of nothingness.

‘Go on then.’ Sam said bitterly.